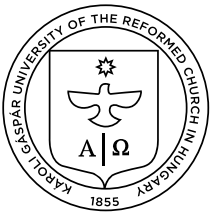
Katalin G. Kállay

SUDDEN SPARKS

To the memory of
Géza Kállay
(1959–2017)



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Katalin G. Kállay

SUDDEN SPARKS

Questions of Surprising Coincidences, Communication, and Mystery while Reading Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers

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INTRODUCTION

1. The present volume is a collection of fourteen essays focusing on the fiction of three outstanding women writers of the American South: Eudora Welty (1909–2001), Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) and Carson McCullers (1917–1967). The essays were written in the hope that the eleven individual close readings (in Part One) as well as the three comparative studies (in Part Two) might enter into a meaningful conversation with each other as well as with the reader of the volume. The works discussed in the essays in Part One are Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman" (1936), "A Still Moment" (1942), O'Connor's "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" (1954), "The River" (1955), "Good Country People" (1955), "The Displaced Person" (1953), "Parker's Back" (1964), "Judgement Day" (1964), McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), and "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." (1942). In Part Two, the comparative studies include Central European pieces as well, so I give a parallel reading of Welty's "A Curtain of Green" (1938) and János Arany's 19th-century ballad, "Goodwife Agnes" (1853), I juxtapose McCullers's "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." with Bohumil Hrabal's "The World Cafeteria" (1963) and István Örkény's "Café Niagara" (1958), finally I present a comparative analysis of McCullers's "Wunderkind" (1936) and Géza Ottlik's "Nothing's Lost" (1968).

I have been studying short fiction for more than thirty years and have constantly been focusing on the possibilities of surprise caused by sudden coincidences, connections between small details, gestures and motifs on three distinct levels: those of the fictive characters, the authors and the readers of the works, respectively. In most of my essays, I pay special attention to all the three levels, trying to find parallel motifs, "sudden sparks", celebrating *togetherness*: in spatial terms, unique meeting points, in temporal terms, unique moments. When these connections include contradictory or antagonistic notions concerning the possibilities of communication and mystery, the painfully paradoxical nature of juxtaposed phenomena might be perceived as something elevating, even blissful. The aesthetic joy or thrill during the reading experience is the result of a difficult and not necessarily pleasant facing of the text and oneself: it depends on what is put at stake, to what extent the reader's own heart and life is involved in the process.

Already in my first book, *Going Home Through Seven Paths to Nowhere*, I outlined a mode of reading based on the thorough and close analysis of literary texts, taking the actual theoretical terminology of interpretation from the words of the texts examined. This is how, following in the footsteps of the

Harvard philosopher, Stanley Cavell, and his idea of "a good encounter"[1] between texts and readers, metaphors like "going home", "the smell of familiarity" and "reading by heart" could apply to the analyses of nineteenth century American short stories by Hawthorne, Poe, Melville and James, as well as to the analysis of the process of reading. In the course of my later research, I have kept my method of close reading as well as my disposition for creating metaphors from the actual words of the texts that might become useful as theoretical terms for interpretation.

In the more recent past, I turned to the work of the above-mentioned Southern women writers. What fascinates me in their literary output is, first and foremost, their grotesque sense of humor as well as their capacity for sharp self-irony. As a group of writers (which they never deliberately formed), they would represent a minority as opposed to "mainstream" authors, however, their writing is not a conscious representation of either "regional" or "feminist" literature. They were not unfamiliar with one another's work, but, apart from distant professional respect and occasional professional rivalry, there was no direct personal or literary friendship between them – although a strong sense of longing for community, communication, and mystery as well as a keen sense of belonging to the South would equally characterize all the three of them. They resist classification and remain unique, still giving voice to a characteristic attitude, which can perhaps be best examined through the study of gestures as well as small motifs with symbolic significance in their texts. The particular, ordinary questions and details of their characters' everyday lives gain a universal scope in their writings, and although they are seemingly confined by place, gender and race, the well-written, thought-provoking stories bringing up basic ethical and existential problems of humanity might be appreciated by any reader in any part of the world. Their talent was recognized by eminent (mostly male) representatives of new criticism, like Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren and Cleanth Brooks.

2. However, their more recent critical assessment is more complicated, controversial and complex, as it may be seen through the works of scholars like Louise Westling (1985),[2] who emphasizes gender in her research, Patricia Yaeger (2000),[3] who focuses more on race-related issues, Pearl Amelia McHaney

[1] Professor Cavell introduced this term in the course of a lecture on Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, while interpreting Kierkegaard's writing on Mozart's *Don Juan*, at Harvard University, in the spring of 1995.This lecture was part of a course entitled "Opera and Film". Later conversations with Professor Cavell reassured me that the term might be used for the ideal appreciation of literature. (Stanley Cavell: *Lecture on Mozart's "Don Giovanni"*, Harvard University, 1995.)

[2] Louise Westling: *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1985.

[3] Patricia Yaeger: *Dirt and Desire. Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing, 1930–1990*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2000.

(2013),[4] whose analysis is centered most profoundly around the notion of place and influence, and Lisa Hinrichsen (2013,[5] 2023[6]), whose scholarly work examines the South in light of trauma studies as well as environmental studies. All the four of these approaches agree in the necessity of re-writing the male-centered Southern Renaissance clichés about the tragic and pessimistic intellectual attitude of the region, the semi-nostalgic lament over the 'lost cause' of the Civil War, or the emphasis on the importance of Bible Belt Christianity. Their aim, as Patricia Yaeger puts it, is "to shake up a narrow and male-defined southern 'tradition', to construct a wide terrain from which to explore southern women's radical difference and their unevenly shared symbol and language systems, erected so boldly across differing topographies of power."[7]

My essays as close readings, motivated first and foremost by an aesthetic interest, are not directly centered around the above-mentioned focal points, my aim is not to accept or reject various placements of the three authors in the history of American literature or in terms of region-, gender- or race-related theories. Nevertheless, before introducing my choice of Welty, O'Connor and McCullers and their texts discussed in the essays, a short overview of some of the basic assumptions by the above-mentioned four female scholars might be important for the reader of this volume.

2.1. Louise Westling introduces them in *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Garden* in the following way:

> When a Paris reviewer asked Eudora Welty whether she ever felt part of a community of Southern women writers including her contemporaries Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, and Caroline Gordon, the answer was a gently qualified *no*. Welty explained that although she and her fellow writers knew and respected each other's work, […] she was not aware of any definite links or passing-about of influences. Yet nowhere else in American literature is there a group of accomplished women writers so closely bound together by regional qualities of setting, character, and time. […] Southern women writers share a definite historical tradition, and we should not be surprised to find much closer alliances among them than Welty acknowledges. The three writers within this tradition who form the most coherent group and whose work is most richly illuminated by mutual comparison

[4] Pearl Amelia McHaney: Southern Women Writers and Their Influence, in Sh. Monteith (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the American South*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, 132–146.

[5] Lisa Hinrichsen: Trauma Studies and the Literature of the US South, *Literature Compass,* Vol. 10, Iss. 8, August 2013, 605–617.

[6] Lisa Hinrichsen: Transforming Southern Space and Place in the Temporal Ecopoetics of Elegy, *"Southern Trans/formations": An International Gathering of the Southern Studies Forum*, Amiens, France, Sept. 22, 2023.

[7] Yaeger: *Dirt and Desire*, xi.

> are Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, and Eudora Welty. Although their birth dates are separated by neat eight-year intervals (Welty 1909, McCullers 1917, O'Connor 1925), the appearance of their major work falls primarily within the two decades from 1940 to 1960. McCullers and Welty published their first books within a year of each other – *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940 and *A Curtain of Green* in 1941 – and continued to produce novels and stories regularly during the forties. Flannery O'Connor's first stories appeared in little magazines at the end of the forties, and during the fifties, she joined Welty and McCullers as a highly respected Southern fiction writer. A vivid, pervasive sense of place and local color ties the work of all three writers to its regional source in the Deep South. These women grew up and drew their inspiration from towns not much more distant from each other than a day's travel. If she had wished, Eudora Welty could easily have driven to Carson McCullers's home town of Columbus, Georgia, in one day and then could have moved on to Flannery O'Connor's Milledgeville for lunch the next. The landscape would change gradually as she crossed Alabama and moved into the red clay hills and long-leaf pines of Georgia, but the social and cultural world would remain essentially the same. These matters of chronology and geography might be trivial if it were not for the profound function of place in the fiction of all three writers and, even more important, if it were not for interrelationships of theme, character, and symbol, which give immense value to their collective work – a kind of richness and power which is far less apparent or affecting when they are taken separately.[8]

Westling's study focuses on the question of gender: according to her, it is essential to see these writers in light of a feminine intellectual tradition, in order to re-write traditional stereotypes.

> Although these women participate in wider literary traditions than those of sex and region, much of what is unique and most powerful about their fiction emerges from their experience as women in a society which officially worshipped womanhood but in its imaginative life betrayed troubled, contradictory undercurrents. We shall never properly value their work if we do not see it fully in this light; we shall be judging it by standards that do not quite fit.
>
> More specifically, unless we look at McCullers, O'Connor, and Welty as women – and through them at the traditions of women's literature which they embody and send forth enriched – serious reading and scholarly discussion of their fiction will be shadowed by condescension.[9]

Louise Westling's observations (and warnings) must be kept in mind, even though issues of gender turn up in my essays only to the extent that, in my view,

[8] Westling: *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, 1–2.
[9] Ibid., 3.

the textual evidences call for their consideration during the process of interpretation, for example, in the analysis of O'Connor's "The Temple of the Holy Ghost".

2.2. Patricia Yaeger speaks up for the equal importance of black and white authors when talking about southern women writers, thus widening the scope of texts as well as basic 'southern' experiences in the authors' backgrounds.

> When *southern* becomes an occlusive term that pertains only to white southern culture, black southern writers are often deregionalized as "black" or "African American". This skews our reading of southern literature and skewers the complex racial texture of women's writing coming out of the South. Second, we need to look at this fiction interracially precisely because of the different conundrums and inequities that black and white writers unearth. The South is, after all, a region where race has been at the heart of aesthetic practice.[10]
>
> Elizabeth Abel has argued that white critics plunge into these comparative territories for selfish reasons, that any theory of "reading across race" must be marked by "white desires."[11] But I want to add this proviso: white southern women's fiction is worth examining precisely because it is continually overwhelmed by racial desires (for racial blending, for racial purity, for appropriating difference, for keeping difference at bay), whereas black women's fiction about the South annotates complex economic and social differences among women in aesthetically fascinating ways. Still, isn't Abel vertiginously right? Isn't *Dirt and Desire* moored in – and marred by – its own integrationist dreams? Perhaps, but this book also gestures toward an intellectual field that needs to be reopened, one that does not mitigate the differences between black and white women.
>
> My goals in *Dirt and Desire* are threefold. First, I want to undomesticate southern women's fiction by inventing more dangerous, up-to-date, culturally acute terms for examining a rich and underread literature. Second, I look at black and white women writers using similar rubrics to map out the regional geographies that they do and do not share – a crucial strategy because southern studies has, until very recently, focused its attention on whiteness without admitting its exclusive agenda. Finally, the field of southern literary studies has been dominated by a huge Faulkner industry that both overshadows and tames the terms we use for reading southern women's fiction. What is missing from Faulkner's epic fiction but present in writers such as Alice Walker or Eudora Welty is a sense of the ways race functions in the nonepic everyday.[12]

[10] Yaeger: *Dirt and Desire,* xii.

[11] Elizabeth Abel: Black Writing, White Reading: Race and the Politics of Feminist Interpretation, in E. Abel – B. Christian – H. Moglen (eds.): *Female Subjects in Black and White: Race, Psychoanalysis, Feminism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997, 118.

[12] Yaeger: *Dirt and Desire*, xv.

Patricia Yaeger's indispensable insights were also very helpful – the question of race comes to the foreground in many of the narratives that I analyze, for example, in O'Connor's "Judgement Day" and "The Displaced Person", as well as in McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Recent critical voices reacted to Paul Elie's[13] assumption that, on the basis of her non-fiction (letters and diaries), Flannery O'Connor's texts have racist undertones – her name was even removed from the dormitory at Loyola University in Maryland. Jessica Hooten Wilson as well as Katy Carl spoke up against such 'cancel culture' gestures. "As we make strides to uproot bigotry from our nation and seek justice on behalf of those who have suffered unjustly, we should see Flannery O'Connor not as a hindrance but as someone who helped us come a long way,"[14] says Hooten Wilson. Katy Carl points out: "To cancel O'Connor at this moment when we desperately need models of establishment figures brought up in racist milieus who achieved any measure of success in perceiving and combatting their own prejudices, would only be to add grief to grief."[15] By mentioning this current critical debate, I only want to call attention to the complexity and controversial sensitivity of race-related issues and assumptions. In my essays, I prefer to pay more attention to gestures of interracial understanding, as exemplified by Richard Wright's 1940 review of Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*: "To me the most impressive aspect of [the novel] is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race."[16] I trust that all the three of the chosen authors may be seen in this light by any reader. Patricia Yaeger also highlights the importance of "the nonepic everyday". In my essays, I frequently focus on this realm, paying special attention to the significance of the Ordinary, in terms of characters, events and language.

2.3. Pearl Amelia McHaney's study emphasizes the importance of place, but she also calls attention to the fact that the three writers were, to some extent and for various reasons, outsiders to the southern cultural milieu:

[13] Paul Elie: How racist was Flannery O'Connor?, *The New Yorker*, 15th June 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/06/22/how-racist-was-flannery-oconnor (accessed 11 March 2026).

[14] Jessica Hooten Wilson: How Flannery O'Connor Fought Racism, *First Things*, 24th June 2020, n.p., https://firstthings.com/how-flannery-oconnor-fought-racism/ (accessed 11 March 2026).

[15] Katy Carl: The Life You Save May Be Someone Else's: On Losing Prejudice While Keeping History, *Dappled Things*, 23rd October 2024, n.p., https://www.dappledthings.org/nonfiction/17893/the-life-you-save-may-be-someone-elses-on-losing-prejudice-while-keeping-history (accessed 11 March 2026)

[16] Richard Wright: Review of "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter", quoted on the back flap of Carson McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company, 1940.

> Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor were both outsiders to the Lost Cause, Bible Belt Southern culture. Welty's parents were from the West Virginia mountains and the farm country of Ohio. She studied outside the South and came home from New York in 1931 during the full force of the Depression when her father died. O'Connor spent her childhood in the small Irish-Catholic community centered on St. John the Baptist Cathedral across from her home. O'Connor found publishing success in the 1950s whereas Welty hit her stride in the 1930s and 1940s. Both Welty and O'Connor were bright, ambitious, and refused potential gender, regional, and educational constrictions.[17]
>
> In humor, the grotesque, place, and truth, Carson McCullers touches both Welty and O'Connor in kind if not in degree. The success of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* at twenty-three created anticipation of McCullers's significance and accomplishment. She, too, was an outsider to the Southern small-town culture. […] Many Southern women writers, however, attribute their courage and point of view in fictionalizing the grotesque to McCullers's work even though McCullers's success was more of an individual sort than of influence.[18]

McHaney calls attention to many other southern woman writers who were influenced by Welty, McCullers, and O'Connor. Her thorough overview also presents a profound analysis of the complex notion of place:

> The South, as a place, is as double-edged as are the grotesque and gothic for Southern women writers. Although "place" in Southern prose and poetry is much touted, it is also misunderstood. Welty argues that while it is essential that characters are rooted in and tethered to some tactile, historical, cultural place, more important are the feelings and truths that are challenged, revealed, made consequential through the fiction. Welty explains, "When we write about people, black or white, in the South or anywhere, if our stories are worth reading, we are writing about everybody."[19] While Southern women's writing is set primarily in the South, the work goes beyond the recognized regional settings and cultural distinctions to explore human relationships worldwide.[20]
>
> Southern women writers inherit from one another. They demonstrate that if one uses the language and place of one's home to create narratives in prose or poetry that stretch toward the mysterious truths of human relationships with one another

[17] McHaney: *Southern Women Writers and Their Influence*, 134.
[18] Ibid., 136.
[19] Eudora Welty: Must the Novelist Crusade?, in Eudora Welty: *Stories, Essays and Memoir*, New York, Library of America, 1998, 810–811. See also https://www.writersdigest.com/be-inspired/vintage-wd-must-the-novelist-crusade
[20] McHaney: *Southern Women Writers and Their Influence*, 136.

> and with the land, the writing moves beyond regional confines out into a world unrestrained by time or space.[21]

Thus, in McHaney's interpretation, the notion of place is expanded to a universal level: it is precisely because of the peculiarity of details connected to the South that the works may gain a wider scope of understanding anywhere in the world.[22] I fully agree with this assumption, and in Part Two of this volume, I will present parallel readings from the literature of a completely different geographical area with a similarly controversial attitude to place, hoping to be more than simply regional fiction for readers worldwide.

2.4. The fourth and last scholar whose work I wish to refer to is Lisa Hinrichsen, who discovers the significantly helpful framework of trauma studies when analyzing the literature of the South, especially in relation to a consciousness of history and the notion of collective as well as individual memory. In my essays, memory gets a special emphasis when the analyzed textual evidence allows, especially in the comparative readings of Welty and Arany and McCullers and Ottlik, respectively. It also makes sense to think of trauma in a comparative way as well, in search of similarities and differences concerning the identity crises of fictive and non-fictive characters of the American South and the European East. Hinrichsen points out the following:

> In bequeathing a sense of grounding specificity and locality to trauma as a general concept, southern studies scholars have been conceptualizing the differing functions of temporal and spatial memorials (narrative, ritual, history, monuments); uncovering and articulating the political uses of mourning; exploring the relationship between cultural memory and cultural amnesia; examining forms of aesthetic representation and memorialization; and articulating the power of countermemories in the political and narrative history of the South. The vocabulary and paradigms of trauma studies, when rooted in the historical and cultural specificity of southern space and place, have enabled further theorizing of the field's longstanding key concepts of memory and history, though there is still a great deal of work to be done, especially in relation to the diversity and complexity of identities and histories found in the region.[23]

> Trauma theory's privileging of the testimonial power of literature resonates with the emphasis in southern studies on the aesthetic power of certain forms of literature

[21] Ibid., 144.

[22] This might remind the reader of Sherwood Anderson's legendary advice to the young William Faulkner about the necessity of concentrating on "the little postage stamp of native soil" in his works.

[23] Hinrichsen: *Trauma Studies*, 609.

> that bear witness to difficult histories. As Felman and Laub argue in *Testimony*, in order to address "the consequent, ongoing, as yet unresolved crisis of history," one must turn to literature, for "literature becomes a witness, and perhaps the only witness, to the crisis within history which precisely cannot be articulated, witnessed in the given categories of history itself."[24,25]

I wholeheartedly agree with Lisa Hinrichsen's emphasis on the aesthetic power of literature: this is the most important issue at stake in my essays. Although sometimes it comes up only covertly in the analyses, there are texts that would especially invite direct discussion of aesthetic questions, for example, Eudora Welty's "A Still Moment".

3. Now I would like to turn to the three authors themselves. I wish to illustrate their special sense of longing and belonging through excerpts from their three respective essays on writing, Welty's "The Reading and Writing of Short Stories", O'Connor's "Writing Short Stories" and Carson McCullers's "The Flowering Dream".

As Welty points out in her famous essay:

> I think we write stories in the ultimate hope of communication, but so do we make jelly in that hope. Communication and hope of it are conditions of life itself. Let's take that for granted, and not get sidetracked by excitement. We hope somebody will taste our jelly and eat it with even more pleasure than it deserves and ask for another helping – no more can we hope for in writing a story. Always in the back of our heads and in our hearts are such hopes, and attendant fears that we may fail – we do everything out of the energy of some form of love or desire to please. The writing of a story uses the *power* of this love or hope, of course, and not its simple, surface form such as comes out – rather nicely– in jelly-making.
>
> […] the first thing we see about a story is its mystery. And in the best stories, we return at the last to see mystery again. Every good story has mystery – not the puzzle kind, but the mystery of allurement. As we understand the story better, it is likely that the mystery does not necessarily decrease; rather it simply grows more beautiful.[26]

[24] Shoshana Felman – Dori Laub, M.D: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, New York, Routledge, 1992, xviii.

[25] Hinrichsen: *Trauma Studies*, 611.

[26] Eudora Welty: The Reading and Writing of Short Stories, *The Atlantic*, February 1949, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1949/02/the-reading-and-writing-of-short-stories/643408/ (accessed 11 March 2026).

McCullers says the following:

> It must be that one writes from some subconscious need for communication, for self-expression. Writing is a wandering, dreaming occupation. The intellect is submerged beneath the unconscious – the thinking mind is best controlled by the imagination. Yet writing is not utterly amorphous and unintellectual. Some of the best novels and prose are as exact as a telephone number, but few prose writers can achieve this because of the refinement of passion and poetry that is necessary. I don't like the word prose; it's too prosaic. Good prose should be fused with the light of poetry; prose should be like poetry, poetry should make sense like prose. […]
>
> In any communication, a thing says to one person quite a different thing from what it says to another, but writing, in essence, is communication; and communication is the only access to love – to love, to conscience, to nature, to God, and to the dream.[27]

And Flannery O'Connor observes:

> Fiction operates through the senses, and I think one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses. No reader who doesn't actually experience […] the story is going to believe anything the fiction writer merely tells him. The first and most obvious characteristic of fiction is that it deals with reality through what can be seen, heard, smelt, tasted, and touched. […] [28]

> There are two qualities that make fiction. One is the sense of mystery and the other is the sense of manners.[29]

The common points through which these excerpts enter into a conversation with one another are the significance of *communication* (basically through the senses – Welty's jelly-making simile is just as ordinary as it is poetic) and the emphasis on *mystery* (which is openly stated by O'Connor, and, in McCullers's terms, it might be implied by the role of poetry and the dream). I keep both of these concepts in mind while focusing on the concrete texts, many of which present the difficulties of communication and show mystery in completely unconventional ways.

[27] Carson McCullers: The Flowering Dream, Notes on Writing, *Esquire*, 52:162–64, December 1959, n.p., https://classic.esquire.com/article/1959/12/1/the-flowering-dream (accessed 11 March 2026).

[28] Flannery O'Connor: Writing Short Stories, in Flannery O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners. Occasional Prose*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969, 91.

[29] Ibid. 103.

4. The structure of the collection of essays follows a simple pattern: in Part One, I first discuss Welty's two stories, then I move on to the six texts by O'Connor, finally I turn to McCullers's three narratives. There are recurring motifs in the analyzed corpus, which I will discuss in more detail in the Conclusion of the volume. In Part Two, I present examples of parallel readings and I introduce the possibilities of comparison between the literature of the American South and Central Europe. This part indicates the topic of my most recent academic interest: how, in what way surprising literary coincidences may be found between two geographically, historically and culturally so different regions.

4.1. The first essay, "Impish Throbbing – Impulses and Imperatives in the Heart of the Story: A Reading of Eudora Welty's 'Death of a Traveling Salesman'" focuses on the protagonist's, Bowman's alienation and his sudden loss of the ability of communication in parallel with his unusual physical sensation of the mystery of the beating of his heart. *The Heart of the Story*[30] is the title of Peter Schmidt's monograph on Welty, which I borrowed for the sake of emphasis: the "impish" throbbing equally disturbs the character, the writer and her text, and the reader. The heart-metaphor, as well as the figurative blood circulation is extended in the essay to the whole structure of the narrative, showing how Bowman, just before his death (indicated only in the title of the story, but made probable by the final hints at symptoms of a heart attack), is allowed to experience and acknowledge the working of his heart, in spite of the heartless practice of his job as a salesman throughout his life. I demonstrate the textual pulsation through the examination of the repetition of the classical tragic motif of the downfall, and I even hint at parts of the text to be learned "by heart", thus becoming internalized in a special way by the reader.

4.2. In the second essay, "Tracing Sight on the Old Natchez Trace: Reading Eudora Welty's 'A Still Moment'", the focus is on seeing. It is important that Welty was an excellent photographer, and her expertise in visual perspectives gets manifested in her texts as well. The story is about a unique momentary encounter between the historical characters of Lorenzo Dow (1777–1834), the Methodist evangelist, John Murrell (1806–1844), the legendary "land pirate", and John James Audubon (1785–1851), the French-American ornithologist and painter on the old Natchez trace. There is very little verbal communication between the preacher, the bandit and the artist, but a surprising coincidence, the appearance of a white heron connects the characters and prevents them from atrocities and open conflict. The reader is invited to a "sight-seeing tour"

[30] Peter Schmidt: *The Heart of the Story. Eudora Welty's Short Fiction*, Jackson–London, University Press of Mississippi, 1991.

in the essay, examining the events from different perspectives. The alienation of all the characters is emphasized, and the most violent action, the killing of the bird is committed by the painter. It seems that the objectification of the living animal is a precondition of its artistic presentation. The essay examines whether and to what extent this gesture is necessary in order to preserve the mystery of life, the feeling of "the old stab of wonder". In the concluding paragraphs, another text by Welty is taken briefly into consideration, "A Worn Path", the setting of which is also the old Natchez trace, but in which the artistic perspective seems to be entirely different, much less constrained and much more natural.

4.3. It is in the third essay, "'God made me thisaway': Embodiments of Interiority in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost'" that I turn to the works of Flannery O'Connor. Here, the idea of mystery gets inevitably intertwined with the question of faith, since O'Connor was a devoted Catholic writer. Her concept of "the moment of grace" will be significant in all the essays about her work. She conceives of *grace* as a powerful divine intrusion into the three-dimensional earthly sphere, often preceded and followed by violence. "Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them", she says in the essay "On Her Own Work"[31] and, indeed, she seems to assume that grace presents itself as a violation of the texture of human expectations, it is incomprehensible on the level of the *what* of the human story, and its intrusion (though 'almost imperceptible') might turn human attention to the attitudinal dimension of the *how*. She also states that acts of violence necessarily precede and follow such a moment of intrusion and seems to suggest that 'the Divine life and our participation in it' upsets and disturbs events: the way in which a divine gesture is performed is far from being peaceful or predictable. She deliberately wants to avoid piety or sentimentalism when dealing with matters of faith. "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" is centered around the conflict between vulgarity and the holy matters. In the story, it is a hermaphrodite at a freak show who humbly demonstrates the gesture of acceptance by saying, "God made me thisaway," and in the imagination of the protagonist, a twelve-year-old girl child, this gesture recalls the ritual of holding up the monstrance with the Host during the Catholic service of adoration in the form of full exposition. Seen from the innocent perspective of the child's dreams, the tent at the freak show might become a church, and the service at the convent, a holy exhibition. "I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it," says the hermaphrodite, and in fact, the same thoughts might come from a priest, holding the transubstantiated body of Christ, the

[31] Flannery O'Connor: On Her Own Work, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 112.

Eucharist. What connects these gestures is the showing of a body, and what prevents the connection from blasphemy or sacrilege is the tone, as well as the Biblical title, referring to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's." These profound questions are presented with a deep sense of humor: the story is full of references to self-irony. In the essay, I introduce the notions of innocence and vulnerability through the richness of humor as necessary preconditions of faith and "the moment of grace".

4.4. In the fourth essay entitled "Initiation and its Travesty in 'The River' by Flannery O'Connor", I continue the investigation of matters of faith as well as the theme of childhood and innocence. In the story, a four-year-old little boy, neglected by his rich and irresponsible parents, gets baptized when his babysitter takes him to a religious meeting by a river, and, impressed by the possibility that this means he will "count", the following day he returns to the same river, where he gets drowned. The story can be read both as a travesty and as a serious account of initiation. The gestures of hands are significant in ushering the protagonist toward his tragic fate. This is the first text in which speaking names gain importance: the family name Ashfield, the name of Mr. Paradise as well as the child's joke of repeating the name of the preacher (Bevel) as his own may be interpreted as symbols, enriching the possibility of meanings.

4.5. The next essay, "The Breath of the Imaginary and Gestures of the Ordinary in Flannery O'Connor's 'Good Country People'" examines the interplay between the Imaginary and the Ordinary as an ever-exciting topic both of philosophy and of literary studies. In the analysis I focus on this interplay through one of O'Connor's best-known stories, in which questions of philosophy (since the protagonist is a PhD in this field) and problems of the human heart (since she is also suffering from a dangerous heart condition) are equally literally important. For the philosophical background, I rely on Stanley Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary*[32] and Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary*.[33] I take both 'breath' and 'gestures' as tentative, unfinished textual signs of the non-verbal disclosure of the characters' disposition and I arrive at a possible response to the quite shocking existential exposure of the main character (abandoned at a country loft, with her glasses and wooden leg stolen), which the reader has to face at the end of the story. The essay also touches upon the possibility and

[32] Stanley Cavell: *In Quest of the Ordinary. Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994.

[33] Wolfgang Iser: *The Fictive and the Imaginary. Charting Literary Anthropology*, Baltimore–London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993.

the significance of the language of faith, as well as on what may be seen as the exciting existential status of 'the almost', a literal failure that might as well be imbued with a sense of metaphorical success. The recognition of speaking names (Mrs. Hopewell, Mrs. Freeman, Joy-Hulga, Manley Pointer) continues, and I pay special attention to the perception of seeing, as well as to the linguistic role of platitudes, commonplaces.

4.6. The sixth essay, "Varieties of Displacement in Flannery O'Connor's 'The Displaced Person'" testifies to my interest in literature responding to the Holocaust as well. I present an analysis of different forms of displacement in the story. Beside the refugee (DP) Guizack family from Poland, the other characters (the tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, the African American farm hands, Astor and Sulk, the owner of the farm, Mrs. McIntyre and the priest) also end up in a displaced situation. I also focus on the "us" vs. "them" mentality, examining the cohesive power of the region-based community in spite of hierarchical and cultural differences, and I study the symptoms of racism and xenophobia through the motifs of eyes and gazing. It is also important that exactly the victim's, Mr. Guizack's perspective is missing from O'Connor's text. The challenging question is to what extent displacement might become a place-bound phenomenon, whether it is specifically American or globally human, whether and in what sense this uncanny condition might become the condition of feeling at home. The question of faith is presented through (self-)irony in the character of the elderly, slightly deranged Father Flynn and his fascination with the beauty of the peacock (a rich Christian symbol). In light of this, it seems that one's "true country" can only be reached after death.

4.7. The seventh essay, "Idolatry in All-Demanding Eyes: A Reading of Flannery O'Connor's 'Parker's Back'" focuses on Flannery O'Connor's penultimate short story, which shows how a simple and ordinary man with a Biblical name (Obadiah Elihu Parker) 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. I examine 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"[34] help my investigations – since I take the story as a study of existential questions. I also 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

[34] Jean-Paul Sartre: The Look, in J-P. Sartre: *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology,* trans. and intro. Hazel Barnes, New York, Philosophical Library, 1956, 340–400.

colorful patchwork based on the collection of paralleled phrases and gestures in the text, hoping that such an imaginary tattoo might become the imprint of a reading experience. The concepts of wonder, vulnerability and dependence are also significant in the text, as well as the child's perspective, since the last word of the story is "baby". The absence and the presence of compassion can also be witnessed at various interpretative levels in the text.

4.8. The eighth essay in the volume is the last one about Flannery O'Connor: "'Judgement Day, Limited': Transgression of Regional and Racial Boundaries in Flannery O'Connor's 'Judgement Day'". My essay examines the ways in which O'Connor challenges stereotypes and subverts conventions in her very last story. The gestures and expressions of transgressing racial and regional boundaries are exaggerated to the point that the portrayal of the old Southerner, Tanner in New York City is on the verge of becoming a caricature. The practical joke the protagonist imagines (namely that upon arriving back home in the South in his coffin, he would pound on the lid just to pop out like a Jack-in-the-box and shout "Judgement Day!" to his astonished African American friend Coleman) is at the same time hilariously funny and deadly serious: it calls attention to the relative nature of judgements that are passed and limits that are transgressed. I also investigate the variety of disturbing limits in the text (between father and daughter, friends and neighbors, South and North, rural and urban environment, as well as between imagination and reality) that question human attempts and attitudes of seeing the world in black and white. I also focus my attention on the *gaze* through examining three significant interracial glances mentioned in the text, and show the conflict between alienation and a sharp sense of belonging. The titular idea of Judgement Day can be connected to the shift from the earthly to the anagogical, metaphysical sphere, and the possible interpretations largely depend on the author's and the reader's trust in moments of grace.

4.9. In all the three following essays, I discuss the works of Carson McCullers. Perhaps she is the writer in whose texts the concept of alienation, unrequited love, and the sudden, though transitory joy of the expansion of the human heart are most at stake. In her novel *The Member of the Wedding*,[35] the teenage heroine, Frankie explains her feelings towards her brother and his bride with a peculiar sentence: "They are the *we* of me."[36] This phrase has a special significance in Carson McCullers's works: the shift from first person singular to first person plural indicates the lonely speaker's longing for and the importance of a real or imaginary community. It is precisely the singularity of the isolated

[35] Carson McCullers*: The Member of the Wedding*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1946.
[36] Ibid., 35.

and solitary characters that somehow reaches a desired plurality in the expression, therefore the center of the basically fictive relationship can only remain the isolated self.

In the essay entitled "'Songs that Voices Never Share': Mr. Singer's Gestures in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*", I examine how Mick Kelly, a tomboy adolescent, a literary predecessor of Frankie, experiences the expansion of the heart first through listening to music. For Mick, something like "the we of me" is what she calls "the inside room," inhabited by her thoughts on music and only one person, Mr. Singer, the deaf-mute engraver who rents a room in their house. The charm of Mr. Singer is in his ability to pay attention, although he cannot talk and cannot understand much of what he can read from the lips of others. He becomes "the we of me," a grotesque father confessor, almost a god-like figure not only for Mick, but for three other characters, Biff Brannon, the owner of the New York Café with a quite feminine tender heart, Dr. Copeland, the African American medical doctor with a strong purpose and Marxist consciousness and for Jake Blount, the troubled anarchist stranger. For Mr. Singer, however, "the we of me" is not the company he keeps in the small town, but his mute friend, the corpulent Greek Antonapoulos with sleepy eyes, who he used to live with, until his friend developed kleptomania, showed antisocial behavior and was finally sent by his Greek nephew to a lunatic asylum. For all the characters, including Mr. Singer, being understood by the person they confide in does not really matter, what matters is the expansion of their hearts and their trust in self-expression. There is a logical discrepancy between longing and belonging, the community they long for is temporary and fragile, and finally all of them remain isolated, belonging, generically, only to themselves. Apart from Mr. Singer, who commits suicide after the death of his Greek friend, the other characters somehow manage to survive the shock of losing the relationship that was most important for them, and the end of the novel is not utterly hopeless, in the words of the grown Mick, who is about to start working in the ten-cent store, there is "some good"[37] for them in the future. In my essay, I pay special attention to Mr. Singer's and the other characters' gestures, conscious or unconscious non-verbal indications of communication or self-expression with the help of Roman Katsman's theory of anthropoetic and mytho-poetic gestures.[38] The motif of "the we of me" might be connected with Welty's notion of "the old stab of wonder" and Flannery

[37] Carson McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1967, 270.

[38] Roman Katsman: Anthropoetic Gesture. A Key to the Milorad Pavić's *Poetics* (Landscape Painted with Tea), *Toronto Slavic Quarterly*, Vol. 12, 2005, n.p., https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312290595_Anthropoetic_Gesture_A_Key_to_Milorad_Pavic's_Poetics_Landscape_Painted_with_Tea (accessed 11 March 2026); Roman Katsman: The Miracle of Literature: An Ethical-Aesthetical Theory of Mythopoesis, *Analecta Husserliana LXXV*, Dordrecht, Springer Dordrecht, 2002, 211–231, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-010-0485-5

O'Connor's "moment of grace", all indicating a strange blend of the ordinary and the imaginary, the sacred and the profane, in search of what has been referred to as *mystery*.

4.10. In the tenth essay, "Common Place vs. Communicative Space: Versions of Inspiration and Suffocation in Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*", focusing on Carson McCullers's disturbingly beautiful narrative, I examine how a literally 'common place', i.e. a store in a dreary and dull small town of the American South might turn into a 'communicative space', i.e. a lively café with a community-forming power, enabling the inhabitants of the town to exchange words and feelings, all due to a spiritual surprise, i.e. the strength of love, felt by the owner, the bony and masculine Miss Amelia Evans toward her hunchback cousin Lymon. The novella is special because of its portrayal of a most grotesque love-triangle: Cousin Lymon, instead of returning Amelia's love, is carried away by her ex-husband, the criminal Marvin Macy as soon as he gets back from the penitentiary and the two of them take revenge on Miss Amelia (the only person Macy had ever truly loved but by whom he was brutally rejected in the course of their absurd, ten-day marriage). The peaceful café changes into a stage of dramatic events. It is finally ruined and boarded up to remain a memento of one-time beautiful bonds as well as of unfinished and unholy affairs. The work is just as suffocating as it is inspirational – depending on the atmosphere: whether, at any given point in the storytelling, the air is dominated by the confinement of the 'common place' or by the freedom of the 'communicative space'. I examine the concepts of place and space with the help of Edward S. Casey's excellent theoretical book, *Getting Back into Place*.[39] The idea of "the we of me" can also be extended to the relationship between the narrator and the story as well as to the reader and the text.

4.11. The eleventh is the last essay in Part One of the collection: it focuses on a widely anthologized short story by McCullers and challenges her theory of love as a solitary feeling with the help of Martha Nussbaum's philosophical work, *Love's Knowledge*.[40] In my essay entitled "Mythology in the Making: A Reading of Carson McCullers's 'A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.'" I examine already familiar questions like the child's perspective, exposure and vulnerability. In the course of the close reading exercise, I focus on the dynamics of the text, on the notion of surprise and on the way in which the narrative unfolds to reveal a post-modern mythology in the making. The transitory nature of the

[39] Edward S. Casey: *Getting Back into Place. Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World*, Bloomington–Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1993.

[40] Martha C. Nussbaum: *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

accidental morning encounter between the young boy and the man "with a big nose and faded orange hair" in the all-night streetcar café calls our attention to the relativity of understanding, whereas the weight of the words "I love you" offers the reader the possibility of being touched. In light of the old man's "science of love", the expansion of the heart might happen towards non-human, even inanimate things, the sudden spark of "the we of me" can be felt in complete isolation as well. Here, too, like in the case of the other examined stories, the questions of communication and mystery come to the foreground.

4.12. Part Two of the collection, as I have already indicated, testifies to my more recent interest in possible parallels between the literary atmosphere of the American South and Central Europe. This part is considerably shorter than Part One, mainly because most of the parallels I draw are truly coincidental "sudden sparks", the more thorough academic grounding for the comparative studies is one of my projects for the future. The connection is "in the making", with the international scholarly research group "South-East Passage", organized together with a group of colleagues from the United States and Hungary. Still, some common points, beside the problems of communication and mystery seem to be already outlined: the importance of a troubled/tragic relation to history, the question of individual and collective memory and a special, grotesque sensitivity to the exposure of vulnerability, creating complex and contradictory visions of identity.

In the essay entitled "Disbelief Against Disbelief: The Cases of Goodwife Agnes and Mrs. Larkin. A comparative analysis of János Arany's ballad 'Goodwife Agnes' and Eudora Welty's story 'A Curtain of Green'", I examine a 19th-century Hungarian ballad by János Arany (1817–1882) and one of Welty's best-known stories, giving the title to her first collection. In spite of the difference in time, genre, and region, there are several meeting points between the texts. The central characters are both widows who cannot comprehend the death of their husbands, and gradually turn insane, both of them get obsessively occupied with an irrational activity (washing a clean sheet, or planting new and new shrubs in a jungle-like garden), they both become not only subjects to the natural elements, but in fact, part of them, transforming into mythical figures of the landscape. Goodwife Agnes had helped her lover to kill her husband – but in the text, she is oblivious of the deed: all she knows is that she must wash her bloodstained linen in the streamlet. Her disbelief is directed against the fact of death and murder, as well as against the fact that the sheet is spotless. Mrs. Larkin's husband died of an accident in the garden, he became the victim of a chinaberry tree that fell on his car, in spite of his wife's protective words: 'You can't be hurt'. Mrs. Larkin's disbelief is directed against the powerlessness of her own most intimate protective words, as well as against the fact that her husband was killed by her garden, all she knows is that she

feverishly must plant more and more green life in the chaotic sloping plot behind her house. From the point of view of the gesture of abandoning oneself to disbelief, the difference between murder and accident seems to be irrelevant. However, the central metaphors of cleaning and planting might subtly indicate separate attitudes to the disbelief in death, i.e. to the continuity of life. Memory, its absence and distortion becomes significant in both texts. In different ways, both protagonists try to cling to a mere impossibility, that something that has happened, might still 'unhappen'. In spite of all evidence, perhaps it can still be undone. The two women become obsessive in undoing the evidence, while this behavior in itself might become a proof of the thing that had happened, as well as of the traumatic deformation it had caused.

4.13. In the penultimate essay, "Cafés and Communities of the Grotesque: a Comparative Reading of Carson McCullers's 'A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.', Bohumil Hrabal's 'The World Cafeteria' and István Örkény's 'Café Niagara'", I compare an already discussed text by McCullers with a Czech and a Hungarian short story, in order to investigate the significance of cafés, both in Central Europe and in the United States of America. These places, by becoming communicative spaces, have the special power of forming communities. As Carson McCullers explains in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*:

> …the spirit of a café is altogether different. Even the richest, greediest old rascal will behave himself, insulting no one in a proper café. And poor people look about them gratefully and pinch up the salt in a dainty and modest manner. For the atmosphere of a proper café implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behavior.[41]

In none of the stories that I compare in this essay would the cafés fit this description, the three places strikingly lack these qualities. "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." presents an awkward situation in a shabby streetcar café, calling attention to the grotesque and transitory aspects of the phrase *I love you*, "The World Cafeteria" is set in a run-down Bohemian place where horrors are both brought closer and distanced by irony in the form of a burlesque, postwar, socialist *danse macabre*, and "Café Niagara" shows the absurdity of a snobbish place serving nothing but the satisfaction of a perverted and repressed desire to be beaten in the underground culture of a totalitarian regime. Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997) and István Örkény (1912–1979) represent the complexity of Central European humor through the subversion of the role of a "proper

[41] Carson McCullers: *A szomorú kávéház balladája. The Ballad of the Sad Café,* Bilingual Edition, Budapest, Európa, 1978, 58.

café" – it is up to the reader to decide whether there is any kind of subversive laughter acceptable as a "proper response".

4.14. The last essay of the collection, "What Is Lost? A Comparative Reading of Carson McCullers's 'Wunderkind' and Géza Ottlik's 'Nothing's Lost'" compares "Wunderkind" (1936), the first story Carson McCullers ever published and wrote at the age of seventeen with a well-known Hungarian story, "Nothing's Lost" (1968) by Géza Ottlik (1912–1990). McCullers's text can be seen as a preparation for her later writing, while Ottlik's story is from the author's mature years, written and published after his most famous novel, *School at the Frontier*. Nevertheless, the texts seem to enter into a conversation: both of them are concerned with questions of music, childhood, talent, memory, identity, and most importantly: loss. It is the concept of loss that might also serve as a meeting point between Hungarian literature and the literature of the American South in general. I elaborate on this parallel as well, on the basis of the two texts. There are many common points in the ways the two authors give voice to a search for a sense of belonging, the two protagonists' sensitivity to music and art in general, their fascination with what they see as "quality" as well as their disappointment, their sensation of irreversible loss. I hope to show that the parallel recognized between these two pieces might open up a new field for discovery: how authors and texts from two historically and geographically distant regions might have similar dispositions when the question of identity is at stake.

4.15. In the Conclusion of the volume, I concentrate on the main motifs recurring in the essays: communication and mystery, the role of non-verbal gestures, the importance of childhood, innocence and vulnerability, the significance of humor and self-irony, the interplay between the profane and the sacred, the representation of various modes of perception (mainly by the eyes and by the heart), and the aesthetic questions concerning literature, visual arts, and music. I indicate various possible directions for further investigation, in the field of literary studies.

PART ONE:
INDIVIDUAL CLOSE READINGS

IMPISH THROBBING – IMPULSES AND IMPERATIVES IN THE HEART OF THE STORY

A Reading of Eudora Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman"[1]

What impulses can make us suddenly become aware of the beating of our own heart? One might say: heightened excitement of a physical or spiritual nature, like healthy excessive exercise or unhealthy irregular fibrillation, a shudder of elemental fear or a thrill of joy; but it might also be the outcome of a contemplative activity: when, alienated from the body, one wishes to observe certain aspects of how it works. The sensation of the constant pulsating rhythm invariably takes us by surprise: this delicate organ works as a natural watch, ticking like a time bomb, marking our entrance into and exit out of time – since all of us have a finite number of heartbeats.

In Eudora Welty's first published story, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," the protagonist, Bowman, back on the road after a period of illness, loses his way in the Southern countryside. He repeatedly feels the winter sun, like "an old drummer," push against the top of his head; then, for apparently no reason, he keeps thinking of his dead grandmother's bed, and although the landscape seems to be totally unfamiliar, he refuses to turn back. The people he sees from his car are distant and strange as if they were objects, and when he finally reaches the road's end, the car starts slowly moving into a ravine since the brake does not work properly. He steps out with his bag of shoe samples and watches how his car, like a "grotesque baby" is saved from crashing, being cradled and gently put to the bottom of the precipice by the thick grapevines. He notices a house on the top of a hill and a woman in the doorway. It is just as he reaches her to ask for help and shelter that he suddenly feels the disturbing sensation of heartbeats coming at random:

> Then all of a sudden his heart began to behave strangely. Like a rocket set off, it began to leap and expand into uneven patterns of beats which showered into his brain, and he could not think. But in scattering and falling it made no noise. It shot up with great power, almost elation, and fell gently, like acrobats into nets. It began to pound profoundly, then waited irresponsibly, hitting some sort of inward

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Impish Throbbing. Impulses and Imperatives in the Heart of the Story: A Reading of Eudora Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman", in Zoltán Abádi-Nagy (ed.): *Lifelong Search for Meaning. A Special Double Issue in Honor of Professor Donald E. Morse*, University of Debrecen, Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies, Spring–Fall, 2012, 227–239.

> mockery first at his ribs, then against his eyes, then under his shoulder blades, and against the roof of his mouth when he tried to say, "Good afternoon, madam." But he could not hear his heart – it was as quiet as ashes falling. This was rather comforting; still it was shocking to Bowman to feel his heart beating at all.[2]

It is this impish, mischievous, unpredictable activity of the heart – at the same time undeniable evidence of its existence – that I would like to examine in my essay, taking a little bit of anatomy and cardiology into consideration. I will investigate how and what kind of impulses and imperatives derive from such a sensation, focusing on four different aspects of the text, each of which might be expressive of different representations of the human heart, respectively. The first section will have Bowman's heart at its center, with all its fibrillations and strange impulses that are followed by unusual gestures. In the second section, I wish to concentrate on the environment, the awkward house and its even more awkward inhabitants, proposing that they can be representative of a heart themselves, providing the protagonist with imperatives, and this way the strange encounter may be the outcome of Bowman's dreamlike allegorical visit to his own heart. The third section will suggest that the text of the story, the pulsating linguistic rhythm together with the accurate and objective description, can be understood as a heart, a "life-pump" at work, as well. Finally, in the fourth section the involvement of the reader's heart will be questioned: what exactly we might take to heart, what parts we may even learn by heart from the story. I strongly hope that in the end all the four of these sections will become part of the throbbing.

Bowman's heart

When Bowman loses his way on the road, he is originally heading for a town called Beulah. As Ruth M. Van de Kieft points out in her book entitled *Eudora Welty*,[3] there is, surprisingly, such a place in Boliver County, NW Mississippi, but, as in the case of most of the place names in Welty's fiction, the allusion is more significant than the verifiability: it might be a reference to the Southern Baptist hymn "Beulah Land"[4] – thus a reference to an eternal home, that is,

[2] Eudora Welty: Death of a Traveling Salesman, in G. McMichael (ed.): *Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. 2, New York, Macmillan, 1985, 1472.

[3] Ruth M. Van de Kieft: *Eudora Welty*, Boston, Twayne, 1962, 52.

[4] "Beulah Land" is a well-known gospel hymn written by Edgar Page Stites (1836–1921) in either 1875 or 1876. The hymn, Stites's most popular, is set to music written by John R. Sweney (1837–1899). The hymn concludes with the chorus:
O Beulah land, sweet Beulah land!
As on thy highest mount I stand,
I look away across the sea

heaven. It might also be important that "beulah" means "married" in the Bible (Isa. 62:4), and Bowman can never get there, since he is painfully single. His first physical sensations of the winter sun pushing his head down would also explain his name: a man who has to *bow* – this gesture will be reinforced by two repetitions in the second section of the story. Bowing is part of a salesman's job – and at this point I cannot help making a reference to a later and more famous salesman of American literature in Arthur Miller's drama (*Death of a Salesman*, 1949), Willy Loman (low-man), whose name is an eye-rhyme to Bowman's and the title of the play, consciously or unconsciously, also echoes the title of the story from 1936. Another text that comes to mind when talking about salesmen is E. E. Cummings's poem "[a salesman is an it that stinks excuse/me]". This poem suggests that by selling practically anything, regardless of its real value, the salesman ultimately sells himself, thus the job might be seen as a form of spiritual prostitution. Prostitution is delicately hinted at in Welty's text when the various women of small roadside hotels are mentioned: "Women? He could only remember little rooms within little rooms, like a nest of Chinese paper boxes, and if he thought of one woman he saw the worn loneliness that the furniture of the room seemed built of."[5] Still, the story is far from showing Bowman as "an it that stinks" – he is rather, as Peter Schmidt observes in his book entitled *The Heart of the Story*, a tragic, troubled male wanderer,[6] who tends to be looking for a maternal bond he cannot recover,[7] and who longs for a home life rather than being threatened by it.[8] The many allusions to childhood and the thoughts of his grandmother's bed also support Schmidt's interpretation. Now that he enters the strange house and sees the woman, whom he immediately judges to be formless, old, and stupid, he becomes deeply disturbed. He would start addressing her in his usual attitude, offering a sample shoe from his bag, but the words simply do not seem to come (especially after observing the feet of the lady covered in bundles and supposing that in the summer, she must be barefoot all the time). The above-quoted heart sensations (which might be diagnosed as atrial fibrillations) make him perform an awkward gesture: as he puts his hat and his bag down, he seems to be making a ceremonious bow again – then, embarrassed by his own unusual behavior, he has to realize that he cannot sell anything in this house. But what can he buy? He is indeed, longing for shelter, warmth, and reassurance in conversation, but the house is dark, cold, windy, and the woman is far from being

Where mansions are prepared for me
And view the shining glory shore
My heaven, my home forever more.

[5] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1471.
[6] Schmidt: *The Heart of the Story*, 49.
[7] Ibid., 52.
[8] Ibid., 58.

talkative. She only says a few vague sentences about Sonny, who would help Bowman with the car, and points to a chair where he could wait. Since there is no direct communication between them, and at the same time the woman seems to feel an obligation to put her chores aside (she leaves the lamp she had been cleaning half dirty) and honor the guest or intruder with her presence, it is Bowman's heart that starts to communicate something painfully comic and blissfully tragic. After learning that Sonny, whom he thought to be the son of the old woman, would help him, "[t]he pulse in his hand leapt like a trout in a brook."[9] Then, after the appearance of Sonny, in whom he even discovers resemblance to his "mother" – more precisely, when Sonny leaves them to wait in silence again until he pulls the car out of the ravine with the help of his mule – Bowman's "heart leapt again. It seemed to walk about inside of him."[10] And, accompanying signs of palpitation, he has the most uncommon impulse which in its sincere, subtle and vulnerable nature as well as in its absurdity might remind one of Sherwood Anderson's "moments of epiphany," for example, in the story entitled "Adventure".[11] Welty describes Bowman's epiphany in the following way:

> This time, when his heart leapt, something – his soul – seemed to leap, too, like a little colt invited out of a pen. He stared at the woman while the frantic nimbleness of his feeling made his head sway. He could not move; there was nothing he could do, unless perhaps he might embrace this woman who sat there growing old and shapeless before him.
>
> But he wanted to leap up, to say to her, I have been sick and I found out then, only then, how lonely I am. Is it too late? My heart puts up a struggle inside me, and you may have heard it, protesting against emptiness … It should be full, he would rush on to tell her, thinking of his heart now as a deep lake, it should be holding love like other hearts. It should be flooded with love. There would be a warm spring day … Come and stand in my heart, whoever you are, and a whole river would cover your feet and rise higher and take your knees in whirlpools, and draw you down to itself, your whole body, your heart, too.[12] (ellipses in the original)

But, instead of acting upon his strange impulse, he feels ashamed and controls himself, although he still feels a strong, silent bond between himself and the woman. When Sonny arrives and the car is ready to go, his chest is rudely shaken by the violence of his heart (this might be a symptom even of pericarditis in which a characteristic chest pain is often present), therefore he wishes

[9] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1474.
[10] Ibid., 1475.
[11] In Sherwood Anderson: *Winesburg, Ohio*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, 85–92. (First edition 1919)
[12] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1475.

to stay. Sonny still takes him out for a short while, to bring the whiskey in from the garden, where it is buried. When at last they make a fire (which is ceremoniously brought by Sonny from a neighboring farm) and the woman cooks the meal, Bowman is surprised to see, in spite of the pain pressing at his eyes, that the woman in fact is young, Sonny in fact is her husband, and the woman is in fact expecting a baby. His revelation of what actually goes on in this house makes him feel somehow cheated. "A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that."[13] Yes, anyone but him. He is left out of the privacy these people are so proud of, he wishes "the child was his" – or he may even have a desire to be the fetus inside the womb. Nevertheless, he obeys the self-imposed imperative to leave at night, after hearing the beating of his heart, "the sound it made under his ribs."[14] He has the impulse to perform another gesture: he leaves all his money under the half-cleaned lamp, in spite of understanding that he cannot really pay for what he had experienced. He cannot help running down the slope. Then something like a heart attack (myocardial infarction) happens:

> Just as he reached the road, where his car seemed to sit in the moonlight like a boat, his heart began to give off tremendous explosions like a rifle, bang bang bang.
>
> He sank in fright onto the road, his bags falling about him. He felt as if all this had happened before. He covered his heart with both hands to keep anyone from hearing the noise it made.
>
> But nobody heard it.[15]

The word "death" only occurs as the first word of the title; here, at the end, it is only suggested. There are various interpretations concerning when exactly he dies, for instance Mark Schorer's idea that the whole story may be hallucinatory, taking place in Bowman's mind as he lies on his hospital bed,[16] or that he in fact dies in the accident at the beginning, right after recognizing the "road's end". The story indeed has a ballad-like tone and a dreamlike atmosphere, so it might also be taken allegorically.

Bowman's allegorical visit to his own heart

"It was a shotgun house, two rooms and an open passage between, perched on the hill. The whole cabin slanted a little under the heavy heaped-up vine that covered

[13] Ibid., 1478.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 1479.
[16] Mark Schorer: *The Story: A Critical Anthology*, New York, Prentice Hall, 1950, 354–55.

the roof, light and green, as though forgotten from summer."[17] Even at the risk of going a bit too far, I have to admit that this description reminds me of the diagram of a human heart (see Appendix), placed in the "chest" of the hill, in proportion the size of a "fist," slanting a little and divided into a right and left side (both consisting of an atrium and a ventricle, respectively), the passage between them being the septum. The right side is responsible for receiving blood from all parts of the body except the lungs and pumping blood into the lungs; the left side receives oxygenated blood from the lungs and then pumps it to all other parts of the body. The heavy and thick vine on the roof may recall the image of the superior vena cava, the aorta, and the pulmonary artery. In this diagram, the exhausted and overtired Bowman would enter the heart-house as oxygen-deprived blood in the right atrium, would leave the house from the right ventricle for a short while (when Sonny takes him out to find the whiskey buried in the garden) to be filled up with "oxygen," that is, energy; then he enters the house again, via the left atrium, which is warmed up by the fire, the meal, and the lamplight, and finally is "pumped," that is, forced to leave the house from the left ventricle (his rug by the fireplace) to enter the "body" of the hill – so at least at the very end of his life, he is able to experience healthy circulation for the first time. Although it is only enough for him to enter "the body of his death" (compare Rom. 7:24),[18] he is indeed delivered from an empty life, having gone through a thorough cleansing in his spirit. The fact that the couple live in isolation may be indicative of Bowman's alienation from his heart; they are old-fashioned representatives of a long-forgotten world (Sonny wears a confederate coat, they play their stubborn game of walking miles to borrow their "own fire" although Bowman offers them his box of matches). Still, everything they do becomes part of a strange, ritual healing procedure. When Bowman enters the house, the darkness touches him "like a professional hand: the doctor's."[19] And immediately he receives the first imperative: "The woman set the half-cleaned lamp on a table in the center of the room and pointed, also like a professional person, a guide, to a chair with a yellow cowhide seat." He is relieved at first but it disturbs him that there is no fire in the hearth, and he soon feels that he is in a "mysterious, quiet danger."[20] His inner imperatives (the reflexes of his old salesman's attitude) do not seem to work: he cannot offer shoes or chatty small talk, and when Sonny comes in, "He knew he should offer explanations and show money – at least appear either penitent or authoritative. But all he could do was shrug slightly."[21] Nevertheless, he obeys all the outer imperatives: when Sonny leads him outside to get

[17] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1472.
[18] "O, wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (King James Version)
[19] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1473.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., 1474.

the whiskey, he makes his third "bow". The following passage might be the demonstration of the pulmonary circulation on our heart-diagram:

> They went through the hall, out to the back of the house, past the shed and a hooded well. They came to a wilderness of thicket.
>
> "Down on your knees," said Sonny.
>
> "What?" Sweat broke out on his forehead.
>
> He understood when Sonny began to crawl through a sort of tunnel that the bushes made over the ground. He followed, startled in spite of himself when a twig or a thorn touched him gently without making a sound, clinging to him and finally letting him go.
>
> Sonny stopped crawling and, crouched on his knees, began to dig with both his hands into the dirt. Bowman shyly struck matches and made a light. In a few minutes Sonny pulled up a jug. He poured out some of the whiskey into a bottle from his coat pocket, and buried the jug again. "You never know who is liable to knock at your door," he said, and laughed. "Start back," he said, almost formally. "Ain't no need for us to drink outdoors, like hogs."[22]

The atmosphere changes inside, due to the fire: "The whole room turned golden-yellow, like some sort of a flower, and the walls smelled of it and seemed to tremble with the quiet rushing of the fire and the waving of the burning lamp-wick in its funnel of light."[23] And when Bowman takes the drink, he says: "'This is good.' … 'This is what I needed.' It was just as though he were drinking the fire off the hearth."[24] So it is evident that he (just like the room, for this is already the left atrium of the heart on the chart) is warmed and filled up with energy. It is in this state that he becomes aware of the situation and after understanding that they had not meant to offer their bed to him, he lies down on the rug by the fire (the left ventricle). When the woman and Sonny have gone to bed, his inner imperative also adjusts to the rules of the house. He knows he must leave (as if the will obeyed the "valves" that let the blood flow only in one direction). He leaves, as if pumped out of this chamber, and if the allegory is workable, he needed this visit to his own heart, expressive of his identity before he died.

The textual pulsations

This is how, many years after its first publication, Eudora Welty described the writing of the story:

[22] Ibid., 1477.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 1478.

> My first good story began spontaneously, in a remark repeated to me by a traveling man – our neighbor – to whom it had been spoken while he was on a trip into North Mississippi: "He's gone to borry some fire." The words, which carried such lyrical and mythological and dramatic overtones, were real and actual – their hearer repeated them to me. As usual, I began writing from a distance, but "Death of a Traveling Salesman" led me closer. It drew me toward what was at the center of it, to a cabin back in the red clay hills – perhaps just such a house as I used to see from far off on a train at night, with the firelight or lamplight showing yellow from its open doorway. In writing the story I approached and went inside with my traveling salesman, and had him, pressed by imminent death, figure out what was there:
>
> "Bowman could not speak. He was shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A marriage, a fruitful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that."
>
> Writing "Death of a Traveling Salesman" opened my eyes. And I had received the shock of having touched, for the first time, on my real subject: human relationships. Daydreaming had started me on the way; but story writing, once I was truly in its grip, took me and shook me awake.[25]

I think this description testifies to Welty's own experience of having "visited her heart" in a way: for her, writing the story was as decisive from the point of view of a search for identity as asking for shelter in the house was for Bowman. She touched upon a central issue, she got to the heart of what – for her – really mattered. Thus in the "grip" of story-writing, she excelled in her clear observations. As Reynolds Price notices: "Miss Welty … has the keenest eyesight in American letters."[26] She was an excellent, professional photographer, and by this, in a certain way, a professional healer. It is not only through the accurate descriptions that her text becomes a special "pacemaker": she also creates a pulsating rhythm through the repetition of movements or gestures.

To demonstrate this, I decided to choose the classically tragic motif of the downfall repeated many times on many literal and allegorical levels. Already in the first paragraph, the sun pushes at Bowman's head. Then in the second, he wishes "he could fall into the big feather bed"[27] in his grandmother's room. Then, still on the same page, the sun pushes at his head again, and in the next sentence he wanted to "to go to bed and sleep off his fatigue." A little later, his car passes through the bed of a heap of dead oak leaves, and then the car gently slips into the ravine, caught by the grapevines. After his first shock of feeling his heartbeat, when "[i]t shot up with great power, almost elation, and

[25] Eudora Welty: *One Writer's Beginnings. The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in the History of American Civilization, 1983*, Cambridge–London, Harvard University Press, 1984, 87.
[26] Reynolds Price: The Onlooker Smiling: An Early Reading of "The Optimist's Daughter", in W. C. Turner – L. E. Harding (eds.): *Critical Essays on Eudora Welty*, Boston, Hall, 1989, 227–28.
[27] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1471.

fell gently, like acrobats into nets,"[28] he dropped his bags, "which seemed to drift in slow bulks gracefully through the air and to cushion themselves on the grey prostrate grass near the doorstep." When he asks the woman for help, he stoops and makes his absurd bow. A few lines below this, the remark is made that "when he was sick, he had learned to sink submissively into the pillows."[29] Inside the house, he has to sit down. He is becoming anxious because of the cold and the silence "[f]or he was not strong enough to receive the impact of unfamiliar things without a little talk to break their fall."[30] Then, after the heart's strange impulses that would direct motion rather in an upward way, "Sunlight touched the furthest pot on the hearth. It was late afternoon." It grows completely dark, and he feels cramped in his chair. "I'll sleep in the dark,"[31] he says to himself. The next memorable downward gesture comes when Sonny commands, "Down on your knees!"; then, inside, it is the dogs who go to sleep first: "one of them was having a dream."[32] After his revelation and the dinner, he lies down on the rug and, finally, he runs down the slope until he "sank in fright onto the road, his bags falling about him."[33] In the end, we can see that all these rhythmically repeated bows strengthen his ultimate downfall and surrender to death.

We could make a more elaborate pattern of parallel gesture-rhythm by focusing on light and darkness (for example, the marked returning significance of the half-cleaned lamp) or, especially, the movements of eyes since observation is Welty's strongest talent, and her collection of essays about writing bears the title *The Eye of the Story*. (Peter Schmidt actually plays with this when he entitles his own book on Welty *The Heart of the Story*.) It would be tempting to take a look at these eyes – for example, Bowman's eyes fixed "on the woman's clasped hands as though she held the cord they were strung on"[34] or Sonny, who looks out "as if he could throw his sight out like a rope,"[35] or the mule who "actually looked in the window. Under its eyelashes it turned target-like eyes into [Bowman's],"[36] and the woman, who looked "serenely back at the mule."[37] Still, in the closing section (chamber or ventricle) of my text, I must turn again to matters of the heart.

[28] Ibid., 1472.
[29] Ibid., 1473.
[30] Ibid., 1474.
[31] Ibid., 1476.
[32] Ibid., 1477.
[33] Ibid., 1479.
[34] Ibid., 1474.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid., 1475.
[37] Ibid.

The heart of the reader

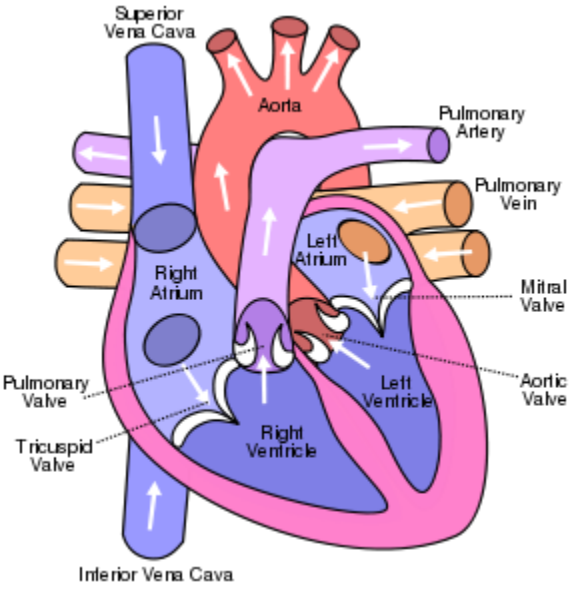
I already mentioned that Welty's text (as well-written literature in general) has the metaphoric capacity of working as a pacemaker, a stimulant for the reader's own heartbeat. In order to help its job, one has to be able to release certain "valves," which I could also call "heart-lids" – a natural resistance to taking fiction too much to heart, to allow the flow of words to enter one's own cardiovascular system. This also means that one cannot avoid a visit to one's own heart when reading such a story – therefore, the danger must be faced that during the rhythmic procedure strange fibrillations might occur. Especially because oxygenation, bringing the text to life, animating it over and over again, is entirely dependent on the reader, the pulmonary circulation has to happen within the self. In order to keep oneself from undesired heart conditions, God forbid, a block, or a myocardial infarction, I think one of the safest and healthiest ways to handle this flow is to internalize the words through learning some of the text by heart. Quoting has the power of befriending a special arrangement of words, of adjusting them, so to say, to one's own blood group. Thus, through the internalized phrases, the text might become reader-friendly, and might help in discovering as well as healing one's own condition, for instance one's alienation from one's heart. One of these healing phrases from Welty's text would surely be the sentence: "A marriage. A fruitful marriage."[38] But all the words must be read over and over again, and more phrases might become equally significant, depending on various factors like momentary blood pressure, temperature or temperament (never to read "in cold blood," for example). When the so imagined pulmonary circle is completed, the reader is ready to emit the interpretation of the text, the words brought to a new life, animated by the reading.

It still remains a question whether the interpretation I proposed can work as a heart in itself. Whether any cardiovascular system can work along the lines of first looking at the protagonist (in the right atrium), then his environment (in the right ventricle), going on to oxygenate the words, that is, bring them to a new life in a pulmonary circle of studies and experiences to be ready for the writer's heart (in the left atrium), and finally allow it all to flow into the reader's heart (in the left ventricle), from which it might be pumped to the surrounding body of new readers and listeners. I wish and hope for such a throbbing in every act of reading – with all my heart.

[38] Ibid., 1478.

Appendix

Diagram of the human heart



TRACING SIGHT ON THE OLD NATCHEZ TRACE

Reading Eudora Welty's "A Still Moment"[1]

The title of the tale to be examined already calls attention to the notion of attention: a still moment seems to be a precondition, essentially important in order to achieve attention of any kind.

In Welty's enigmatic story, it is a preacher, a bandit and an artist who share a still moment of encountering a snowy heron at a clearing near the old Natchez trace, with various degrees and types of attention: the preacher wishes to witness how God's glory manifests itself in nature, the bandit wishes to kill the preacher and "destroy the present" and the artist wishes to kill the bird in order to be able to draw it. All the three characters are historical figures: Lorenzo Dow (1777–1834), the Methodist evangelist, John Murrell (1806–1844) the legendary "land pirate" and John James Audubon (1785–1851), the French-American ornithologist and painter.

The text reflects on the different ways of approach – on how attention can be seen both as a passive and as an active phenomenon; and surprisingly, it is the artist whose action is the most violent, who effectually kills for the sake of later representation, for the sake of the appreciation by "a stranger's sight". This stranger, be it the person looking at the drawing or the reader of the story, may be dazzled by the complexity of interacting vectors of concentration. The author's conscious choice of a triple focus gains yet another perspective when her experience as an excellent photographer is taken into consideration. My essay wishes to examine the subtle interrelatedness of eye-sights and angles, the collection and dispersion of tension in the narrative, as well as the question whether, in what sense and to what extent it is necessary to kill before giving birth to a work of art. The well-constructed artistic complexity will be briefly contrasted in the end with a seeming simplicity in another story by Welty, also taking place on the old Natchez trace: "A Worn Path". There, the natural attention with which the old lady, Phoenix Jackson turns towards nature and her journey shows another possible way to relate to sights and visions – thus the reading experience might become a challenging tour of "sight-seeing".

As critics Victor H. Thompson and Pearl Amelia McHaney both observe in their articles on "A Still Moment,"[2] the author, besides doing an elaborate

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Tracing Sight on the Old Natchez Trace: A Reading of Eudora Welty's "A Still Moment", in Katalin G Kállay et al. (eds.): *The Arts of Attention*, Budapest, KRE–L'Harmattan, 2016, 307–317.

[2] Victor H. Thompson: The Natchez Trace in Eudora Welty's "A Still Moment", *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1973, 59–69; Pearl Amelia McHaney: Historical Perspectives in

research on the history of this particular geographical area in Mississippi (carefully studying the journals of Audubon and Dow, as well as the records of the famous outlaws and their robberies along the Natchez Trace) uses (and slightly transforms) her source material to accentuate the similarities between the three characters, who are strangers to one another, exchanging no words, just glances during the unique experience that brings them together for a moment, only to let them go immediately in three separate ways.

Thus the zeal of the Methodist preacher and his strategy against hostile Indians, snakes and renegade spirits, struggling in his imagination with throngs of unsaved souls literally blocking his way, is quite similar to the imaginative enthusiasm of the criminal, who is a leader, in his mind, of the "Mystic Rebellion" of slaves, and who, from the beginning of his portrayal, "had the alternately proud and aggrieved look of a man believing himself to be an instrument in the hands of a power."[3] Murrell, indeed, often disguised himself as an itinerant preacher: therefore, in Welty's text, he can be seen somewhat like a shadow of Lorenzo – as he imitates him, movement by movement when the two of them dismount their horses on the clearing: "He drew rein, and Murrell drew rein, he dismounted and Murrell dismounted, he took a step, and Murrell was there too."[4] It is through a subtlety of gestures and glances that a complicated geometrical choreography develops and becomes a substitute for verbal communication between the characters. Audubon, the artist is the third to be introduced, and in his way of observing and objectifying the world around him, there is a slight similarity to Murrell's meticulous observations, e.g. "Murrell's eyes followed an ant on a blade of grass, up the blade and down, many times in the single moment,"[5] and the similarity between the bandit and the artist can further be strengthened when Audubon fires the gun, closes his eyes and kills the bird.

In spite of these obvious similarities, the tale is just as much about separateness as about convergence: each of the characters tends to pay more attention to himself and his own achievement than to the others. No wonder that Robert Penn Warren took the motto of his famous essay "Love and Separateness in Miss Welty"[6] from this story, in which love can only be interpreted in a specific personal and imaginary context for each of the separated

"A Still Moment", in W. C. Turner – L. E. Harding (eds.): *Critical Essays on Eudora Welty*, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1989, 52–69.

[3] Eudora Welty: A Still Moment, in E. Welty: *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, New York, Harcourt, 1994, 191.

[4] Ibid., 193.

[5] Ibid., 195.

[6] Robert Penn Warren: Love and Separateness in Miss Welty, *Kenyon Review*, Vol. 6, 1944, 246–59; reprinted in W. C. Turner – L. E. Harding (eds.): *Critical Essays on Eudora Welty*, Boston, G.K. Hall & Co., 1989, 42–51.

characters – whose sights and visions are greatly determined by these individual contexts.

1. Lorenzo

Lorenzo is urged on his way by the zeal: "I must have souls!"[7] and he is blinded by his own imagination to the extent that he cannot see his immediate surroundings (cannot even notice, for example, Murrell's malevolent approach). He interprets everything, including fireflies, as signs from God:

> These were the signs sent from God that he had not seen, the accumulated radiance of saved souls because he was not able, and that his eyes were more able to see the fireflies of the Lord than His blessed souls. "Lord, give me the strength to see the angels when I am in Paradise" he said. "Do not let my eyes remain in this failing proportion to my loving heart always."[8]

It seems that it is easier for him to love than to see: "Riding faster on the beast and still faster until he felt as if he were flying, he sent thoughts of love with matching speed to his wife Peggy in Massachusetts. He found it effortless to love at a distance. He could look at the flowering trees and love Peggy in fullness, just as he could see his visions and love God."[9] When Murrell turns his face toward him (an unmistakable sign of having been captured by the bandit), "Lorenzo would have seized the man at once by his black coat and shaken him like prey for a lost soul", had the criminal not been quicker and "put his own hand out, a restraining hand, and laid it on the wavelike flesh of [Lorenzo's] horse, which quivered and shuddered at the touch."[10] As the two of them dismount and stop by the great live oak tree, Lorenzo sees Murrell, standing beside him, "like a brother, seeking light."[11]

And in the moment when he catches sight of Audubon, he feels he had met a possible angel: "Lorenzo welcomed him and turned fond eyes upon him. To transmute a man into an angel was the hope that drove him all over the world […]."[12] He desperately wants to start a conversation and utters the only spoken words in the story: "'God created the world', said Lorenzo, 'and it exists to give testimony. Life is the tongue: speak.' But instead of speech there happened a moment of deepest silence."[13]

[7] Welty: *A Still Moment*, 189.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 193.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 194.
[13] Ibid.

It is in this still moment that the snowy heron comes to feed on the marshes nearby, which Lorenzo takes as a direct message: "Praise God, His love has come visible."[14] Shooting the bird simply does not fit into this context. When it happens, Lorenzo is baffled and horrified.

> He could understand God's giving Separateness first and then giving Love to follow and heal in its wonder; but God had reversed this, and given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first. Perhaps it was that God never counted the moments of Time; Lorenzo did that, among his tasks of love. Time did not occur to God. Therefore did He even know of it? How to explain Time and Separateness back to God, Who had never thought of them, Who could let the whole world come to grief in a scattering moment?[15]

This passage, part of which is quoted by Robert Penn Warren, calls attention to temporality – both love and separation seem to be momentary, that is, a matter of moments. Although the title mentions a still moment (the indefinite article referring here to one particular instance), it is quite surprising that that the word "moment" occurs seventeen times in the text, always bringing the flow of the narrative to a halt, giving it a new direction or a new perspective. This way both the authorial and the perceptive attention seems to be alternately focused and dispersed – so it is always a new sight one gets to see.

Lorenzo discards the above-quoted dilemma about God's relation to time as a temptation. "Tempter!"[16] he shouts into the marshes and returns to his visions in the saddle, hurrying to the camp ground, ready to deliver his sermon entitled "In that day when all hearts shall be disclosed". It seems that he has to close his own heart hermetically (shield and protect – or rather imprison it?) in order to talk about the disclosure of all hearts. From that perspective, his own heart must be disowned, it must be seen as one of the hearts of "others".

2. Murrell

Murrell, the "dark man" singles out Lorenzo to be his next victim and he rides along without looking at the preacher, but constantly talking – not so much in the hope of communication, rather as part of a special ritual. In Welty's representation, Murrell is a great story-teller, capturing his audience to the extent that in the end, the narrative about "a silent man doing a piece of evil"[17] will indeed be a matter of life and death and the listener, indeed, has to go

[14] Ibid., 195.
[15] Ibid., 198.
[16] Ibid., 199.
[17] Ibid., 192.

through a quite peculiar "anagnorisis": when the bandit turns his full countenance upon him, he must recognize in "one dawning look" that the story is about the present moment, that he himself is a character in it and that he is going to be murdered.

> "Destroy the present" – that must have been the first thing that was whispered in Murrell's heart – the living moment and the man that lives in it must die before you can go on.[18]

In Welty's portrayal, this ritual for Murrell must start again as soon as it ends:

> But behind him and before him he kept in sight a victim, he saw a man fixed and stayed at the point of death no matter how the man's eyes denied it, a victim, hands spreading to reach as if for the first time for life. Contempt! That is what Murrell gave that man.[19]

This method, however, does not seem to work in the case of Lorenzo who, being obsessed with his own visions, cannot even hear Murrell's words. When they come to the clearing and meet Audubon, the criminal has to hide his gun in disappointment. Welty's narrative shows Murrell through Audubon's eyes, as the artist sees him:

> Then in Murrell Audubon saw what he thought of as "acquired sorrow" – that cumbrousness and darkness from which the naked Indian, coming just as he was made from God's hand, was so lightly free. He noted the eyes – the dark kind that loved to look through chinks, and saw neither closeness nor distance, light nor shade, wonder nor familiarity. They were narrowed to contract the heart, narrowed to make an averting plan.[20]

When the heron flies down, a whole paragraph-long sentence is dedicated to Murrell's eyesight, in which his own thumb with the letters H.T. (horse thief) comes into focus triggering his own vision:

> Murrell, in suspicion pursuing all glances, blinking into a haze, saw only whiteness ensconced in darkness, as if it were a little luminous shell that drew in and held the eyesight. When he shaded his eyes, the brand "H.T." on his thumb thrust itself into his own vision, and he looked at the bird with the whole plan of the Mystic Rebellion darting from him as if in rays of the bright reflected light, and he stood looking at

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid., 194–5.

> himself proudly, leader as he was bound to become of the slaves, the brigands and outcasts of the entire Natchez country, with plans, dates, maps burning like a brand into his brain, and he saw himself proudly in a moment of prophecy going down rank after rank of successively bowing slaves to unroll and flaunt an awesome great picture of the Devil colored on a banner.[21]

The brand on his thumb will correspond to the imaginary brand in his brain – but when he perceives the "still moment" of awe around the heron,

> His look pressed upon Lorenzo, who stared upward, and Audubon, who was taking out his gun, and his eyes squinted up to them in pleading, as if to say, "how soon may I speak, and how soon will you pity me?" Then he looked back to the bird, and he thought if it would look at him a dread penetration would fill and gratify his heart.[22]

Murrell is the only one to think of the *look* of the bird, his meticulous observation is mingled with his inner vision. (Thus he shares characteristics with both of the other men.) And when the heron is shot, he feels proud again and satisfied: the "present" had been destroyed, the gun had been fired, no matter that it was not him who fired it. The death of the bird saved Lorenzo's life (although the preacher never gets to realize this special sacrifice). Murrell starts out into the wilderness looking for the next victim (and, like Lorenzo, remaining in his self-imprisoned world of visions) with enthusiasm:

> Travelers were forever innocent, he believed: that was his faith. He lay in wait; his faith was in innocence and his knowledge was of ruin; and had these things been shaken? Now, what could possibly be outside his grasp?[23]

Welty seems to emphasize that the perception of the other will forever be outside his grasp, as is the case with all the three characters.

3. Audubon

Audubon, the artist is described as a "careful", a "sure" and a "tender" person. He is a true scholar, memorizing and recalling his descriptions and observations (as if the mantra-like repetition of the lexicon-entry sounding pieces of information had the effect of a magic spell, not only imitating but creating some reality around him). Soon after he arrives at the live oak tree "a sure man,

[21] Ibid., 195.
[22] Ibid., 196–7.
[23] Ibid., 197–8.

very sure and tender, as if the touch of all the earth rubbed upon him and the stains of the flowery swamp had made him so,"[24] soon after falling silent in spite of Lorenzo's encouraging words, soon after observing and professionally measuring the look of Murrell, the solitary heron comes to the marshes.

> Audubon's eyes embraced the object in the distance and he could see it as carefully as if he held it in his hand. It was a snowy heron alone out of its flock. He watched it steadily, in his care noting the exact inevitable things. When it feeds it muddies the water with its foot… It was as if each detail about the heron happened slowly in time, and only once. He felt again the old stab of wonder […][25]

In this passage, from the point of view of Audubon's (and Welty's) aesthetics, three words need special attention: *embrace*, *object* and *wonder*. The observed part of the world (no matter whether it is alive or not) has to be embraced, that is, tenderly loved by the artist. Then, no matter whether it is alive or not, it has to be objectified (which, in the case of a living thing is more or less equivalent to killing). Finally, one may feel "the old stab of wonder" in a moment, become both its agent and its victim, both active and passive in bringing it about – because this moment of wonder, as I read in the story, transcends the question whether either oneself or the thing observed is alive or not. The two seem to share a dimension of wonder that "stabs" both, that results in a work of art which, in turn, may "stab" the person encountering it, the "stranger's sight". But is the killing an indispensable part of this process? In Welty's portrayal of Audubon's thoughts about the artist's sight, it is a must, a necessary professional gesture.

> Some men's eyes persisted in looking outward when they opened to look inward, and to their delight, there outflung was the astonishing world under the sky. When a man at last brought himself to face some mirror-surface he still saw the world looking back at him, and if he continued to look, to look closer and closer, what then? The gaze that looks outward must be trained without rest, to be indomitable. It must see as slowly as Murrell's ant in the grass, as exhaustively as Lorenzo's angel of God, and then, Audubon dreamed, with his mind going to his pointed brush, it must see like this, and he tightened his hand on the trigger of the gun and pulled it, and his eyes went closed. In memory the heron was all its solitude, its total beauty. All its whiteness could be seen from all sides at once, its pure feathers were as if counted and known and their array one upon the other would never be lost. But it was not from that memory that he could paint.[26]

[24] Ibid., 194.
[25] Ibid., 195–6.
[26] Ibid., 197.

Audubon kills this bird in a matter-of-fact way – and although he closes his eyes after pulling the trigger, he does this without any remorse or feeling of guilt. Although the gesture of killing an innocent white bird, a symbol of happiness and beauty is very similar to the gesture commemorated in Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner", this hunter has no regret, no need of repentance: he is convinced that this is the way things should be. He is slightly startled only by Lorenzo's reaction:

> His opening eyes met Lorenzo's, close and flashing, and it was on seeing horror deep in them, like fires in abysses, that he recognized it for the first time. He had never seen horror in its purity and clarity until now, in bright blue eyes. He went and picked up the bird. He had thought it to be a female, just as one sees the moon as female; and so it was.[27]

Both his way of observing Lorenzo and his way of examining the bird show that he, too, exists in a self-imprisoned world of imagination, cannot rid himself of his own intentions and goals, thus he cannot succeed in reaching out for the *other*, either. Nevertheless, being an artist, he reflects on this in dejection, recognizing his limits:

> What he would draw, and what he had seen, became for a moment one to him then. Yet soon enough, and it seemed to come in that same moment, like Lorenzo's horror and the gun's firing, he knew that even the sight of the heron which surely he alone had appreciated, had not been all his belonging, and that never could any vision, even any simple sight, belong to him or to any man. He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts; and that it would always meet with a stranger's sight, and never be one with the beauty in any other man's head in the world. As he had seen the bird most purely at its moment of death, in some fatal way, in his care for looking outward, he saw his long labor most revealingly at the point where it met its limit.[28]

The careful reflection, the geometrical intricacy of the triple focus can be made even more exciting when a parallel is drawn between Audubon's painting and Welty's art of photography. The photographer also finds the world "at gunpoint", having to shoot (to some extent: destroy) a living moment, to create a still moment (and every snapshot is, to some extent, the result of killing the present). Is killing the present the only way to preserve the presence? The story seems to suggest something like this as an aesthetical message. It was one of Welty's

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 198.

favorite stories, but she categorically denied that the text would be symbolic. As she said in a letter to her agent, Diarmuid Russell, "I wanted it to state literal facts, but since the facts were about character and experience in themselves the terms I used sounded as if they were symbolic."[29] And later, she says: "In this case, the literal seemed to me more wonderful than the symbolic. I think often it is more wonderful, for it takes its place in a higher organization of knowledge than most symbolism."[30] It is very difficult, however, to exclude a symbolic meaning from the story's final sentence: "Then the sun dropped below the trees, and the new moon, slender and white, hung shyly in the west."[31] The literal sunset brings about a darkness illuminated only by the slender and white new moon – and one cannot help thinking of the moon's already mentioned femininity as well as the slender and white, female heron, the center of all aesthetic musings.

An earlier story by Welty, "A Worn Path" also takes place on the old Natchez trace, but whereas the three characters who tread the path in "A Still Moment" are relatively young, white men, the main character of "A Worn Path" with the highly symbolic name Phoenix Jackson is an old black woman. She has the name of two towns in Mississippi, but her mythological first name also alludes to a bird rising from its ashes. She, unlike the men of "A Still Moment", does not walk with a goal in mind, her feet seem to be taking her all along the way. She is exposed to nature to the extent that she becomes part of it, she talks to the animals and plants like she talks to herself. She, too, has visions, but of a different kind, imagining, for example, a slice of marble cake offered to her on a plate by a little boy. Scared by a black dog, she falls into a ditch to be rescued by a hunter, she first gets frightened by a scarecrow but then she dances with it. By the time she gets into the town, she even forgets what had brought her there. The nurse at the charity center has to remind her of her little ill grandson, and that she probably came for his medicine. Her attitude, as I see it, offers another type of "sight": the sight of literal and ordinary participation in one's surroundings. Beyond possible immediate connotations concerning age, gender or race, this type of non-reflected sight seems to be taking its place "in a higher organization of knowledge", somewhere close to the accumulated wisdom of generations of Native Americans along the old Natchez trace, long before the arrival of either the white or the black population.

The sight-seeing tour, impossible to complete or exhaust, must come to a halt at this point – but it has already fulfilled its aim if it managed to call attention to the common point shared by all the examined characters, the author and hopefully the readers, i.e. "the old stab of wonder".

[29] A 1942 letter to Diarmuid Russell, quoted in Michael Kreyling: *Author and Agent: Eudora Welty and Diarmuid Russell*, New York, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1991, 79.

[30] Ibid., 86.

[31] Welty: *A Still Moment*, 199.

"GOD MADE ME THISAWAY"

Embodiments of Interiority in Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost"[1]

As Flannery O'Connor notes in a letter to Robie Macauley,[2] "a lady from Boston could not believe that a Catholic could have the thoughts it would take to write 'A Temple of the Holy Ghost.'"[3] O'Connor, who was a devoted Catholic writer of the American South, wanted, by all means, to avoid sentimentality or strained piety in her works. She very rarely made Catholicism a central theme in her fiction – "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" (a story from 1954, which later came out as the fifth piece in her collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*) is one of these exceptions. Her Catholicism and spirituality are quite unusual and radically surprising, even shocking for some readers, she has been called, by Ralph C. Wood, for example, "a satirist of the negative way." Wood explains that "her natural theology is rooted in a radically negative vision of God's activity in the world. 'Grace must wound,' says O'Connor, 'before it can heal. It must be dark and divisive before it can be warm and binding.'"[4] The stories often culminate in violent scenes – and the understanding of the working of grace can also be fatal to the characters.

Although the piece I am about to examine is far from being tragic or violent, it is quite disturbing, and it does, to say the least, startle the reader. The above-mentioned objection of the Boston lady is probably directed against what she takes as the vulgarization of holy matters. In the story, as I already mentioned in the Introduction to this volume (pp. 18–19), it is a hermaphrodite at a freak show who humbly demonstrates the gesture of acceptance by saying, "God made me thisaway,"[5] and in the imagination of the protagonist, a twelve-year-old girl child, this gesture recalls the ritual of holding up the monstrance with the Host during the Catholic service of adoration in the form of full

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: "God made me thisaway": Embodiments of Interiority in Flannery O'Connor's "A Temple of the Holy Ghost", in Sára Tóth et al. (eds.): *Szólító Szavak – The Power of Words: Tanulmányok Fabiny Tibor hatvanadik születésnapjára – Papers in Honor of Tibor Fabiny's Sixtieth Birthday*, Budapest, KRE–L'Harmattan, 2015, 433–445.

[2] Robert Macauley (1919–1995) American editor, novelist and critic.

[3] Connie Ann Kirk: *Critical Companion to Flannery O'Connor. A Literary Reference to Her Life and Work*, New York, Facts on File, Inc, 2008, 286.

[4] Ralph C. Wood: Flannery O'Connor as a Satirist of the Negative Way, in R. C. Wood: *Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1988, 81, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.21995776.9

[5] Flannery O'Connor: A Temple of the Holy Ghost, in R. Giroux (ed.): *The Complete Stories*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, The Noonday Press, 1996, 245.

exposition. Seen from the innocent perspective of the child's dreams, the tent at the freak show might become a church, and the service at the convent, a holy exhibition. "I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it," says the hermaphrodite,[6] and in fact, the same thoughts might come from a priest, holding the transubstantiated body of Christ, the Eucharist. What connects these gestures is the showing of a body, and what prevents the connection from blasphemy or sacrilege is the tone, as well as the Biblical title, referring to Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's."[7] The child, who, by the way, cannot go to the fair and learns about the "freak" from her cousins, understands the special privilege, as Richard Giannone points out, of "welcoming a sacred guest into one's body." The text is celebrating "the sanctuary of flesh,"[8] what is at stake is coming to terms with one's imperfect body in relation to the sacrament. And indeed, it is the temple of the body in the story, where the various possible places of interiority may meet as varieties of "home," of self-acceptance. The narrator introduces nearly all the characters through the details of their physical bodily defects, exposing them this way to the mercy of the reader, describing them as vulnerable, thus giving each of them the possibility of becoming holy.

In her essay "The Church and the Fiction writer" O'Connor says: "When people have told me that because I am a Catholic I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist."[9] Her argument continues the following way:

> It is when the individual's faith is weak, not when it is strong, that he will be afraid of an honest fictional representation of life, and when there is a tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual and make it resident in a certain type of life only, the supernatural is apt gradually to be lost. Fiction, made according to its own laws, is an antidote to such a tendency, for it renews our knowledge that we live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions. The Catholic fiction writer, as fiction writer, will look for the will of God first in the laws and limitations of his art and will hope that if he obeys these, other blessings will be added to his work.[10]

[6] Ibid.
[7] 1Cor. 6:19–20. (King James Version)
[8] Richard Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, New York, Fordham University Press, 1999, 76, 78.
[9] Flannery O'Connor: The Church and the Fiction writer, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 146.
[10] Ibid., 151–152.

Among "other blessings," Flannery O'Connor's life and writing is blessed with a rich and all-inclusive sense of humor. The careful and ironical preparation of the serious central topic of the story, its representation at various comic levels is just as important as the theme itself. At the beginning of the narrative, a relatively safe Southern home is presented, inhabited by the twelve-year-old child, her mother and Miss Kirby, the lonesome schoolteacher, their lodger. Their weekend is made busy by the banal event of a visit: Susan and Joanne, the fourteen-year-old second cousins come from the convent school Mount Saint Scholastica to spend two days with the family. The girls are not easy to entertain: the age difference between them and the child is decisive. They keep giggling about boys, looking at themselves in the mirror, and they want to have some fun after the dull weekdays. The first sentence of the story introduces them this way: "All weekend the two girls were calling each other Temple One and Temple Two, shaking with laughter and getting so red and hot that they were positively ugly, particularly Joanne who had spots on her face anyway."[11] The word "temple," the laughter and the exposure of the red spots are mentioned right away and together, creating a critical distance as well as an uncanny sense of vulnerability. The child is first seen as measuring up and judging the other two: "The child decided, after observing them for a few hours that they were practically morons and she was glad to think that they were only second cousins and she couldn't have inherited any of their stupidity."[12] But on the next page, her vulnerability is also exposed through laughter: she finds her own idea that Mr. Cheatam, Miss Kirby's old gentleman caller should show the cousins around so funny that "she nearly choked on the food she had in her mouth. She doubled over laughing and hit the table with her fist and looked at the two bewildered girls while water started in her eyes and rolled down her fat cheeks and the braces she had in her mouth glared like tin."[13] In fact, Mr. Cheatam's nickname, "Cheat," his baby blue Pontiac black inside with the African Americans he brings into town for ten cents "apiece," his habit of bringing little presents, his protruding stomach, his teeth backed with gold and his impish "Haw haw" characterize him just as mercilessly as the others are described (in spite of the fact that he will have no serious role in the story, his caricature-like presentation is more part of the setting). The humor in Miss Kirby's introduction comes from the fact that she does not understand the joke, and the mother is described as laughing "in a guarded way." The first scenes create a comic atmosphere in which everybody (except the mother) becomes vulnerable through their reactions to jokes. A change is brought about when it turns out (after several giggling attempts at uttering the sentences) that the teenagers are laughing over the advice of the old nun, Sister Perpetua, namely that in case a young man should behave in an

[11] O'Connor: *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, 236.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 237.

ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of a car, they only have to say, "Stop, sir! I am a temple of the Holy Ghost!" and that will solve the problem. Both the mother and the child stop laughing and the mother rebukes Joanne and Susan for being silly: "After all that's what you are – Temples of the Holy Ghost." And the child keeps thinking about the words she heard: "I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost, she said to herself, and was pleased with the phrase. It made her feel as if somebody had given her a present."[14] As Giannone comments, "the thought of intimacy in an exalted sphere delights her."[15] I wish to examine how this present will be figuratively "unwrapped" in the text, how it gains more and more significance through the many levels of representation.

When it is finally decided (on the basis of the child's suggestion) that the two boys, Wendell and Cory from the neighborhood, should entertain the two girls, have dinner with them at home and take them to the fair, an interesting contest of religions is presented through the songs the protestant boys sing and the hymn sung by the convent girls. Both of the boys plan to be Church of God preachers, as the child observes, "because you don't have to know nothing to be one."[16] The sun is going down and the sky is turning "a bruised violet color"[17] when they start to sing – this is important because both the color red and the motif of the sun will return many times in the story. Accompanied by their guitar and with a "dog-like loving look," the boys perform two country gospels, "The Lily of the Valley" and "The Old Rugged Cross". Both of the songs (one coming from the end of the 19th, the other from the beginning of the 20th century[18]) are about Christ's sacrifice, the redemption and the importance of the presence of Jesus in one's life. The girls, a bit embarrassed, listen half giggling, half politely, the tunes fail to move them – but as an answer, they start singing the "Tantum Ergo" (these are the opening words of the last two verses of *Pange Lingua*, a mediaeval Latin hymn by St. Thomas Aquinas about "corporis mysterium", the mystery of the body), which is normally sung during veneration and benediction in the course of the Catholic service. The hymn is an adoration of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, an expression of exultation and joy.[19] But the boys are startled by the song they don't

[14] Ibid., 238.

[15] Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, 1999, 78.

[16] O'Connor: *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, 239.

[17] Ibid., 240.

[18] "The Lily of the Valley" is a song composed by William Charles Fry (1837–1882) for the Salvation Army in London, and it became a popular Protestant hymn, present in many of the church song books. "The Old Rugged Cross" was written in 1912 by George Bennard (1873–1958), and became a famous country gospel, performed by the greatest singers of the 20th century, including Mahalia Jackson and Johnny Cash.

[19] The English translation is as follows: (St. Thomas Aquinas: *Tantum Ergo*, Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tantum_ergo (accessed 16 March 2026).)

Down in adoration falling,
Lo! the Sacred Host we hail,

understand – and indeed, the first two lines of the last stanza (Genitori, Genitoque / Laus et jubilatio) may sound strange, even obscene to the ears not familiar with the Latin words. Their faces turn "dark red in the gray-purple light." This awkward semi-seduction scene ends with the boys' conclusion: "That must be Jew singing."[20]

The child, listening to the songs and the conversation from below the porch, standing on a barrel pushed into some bushes, finds this so absurd and upsetting that, revealing her hiding place, she roars: "You big dumb Church of God ox!", then she clumsily falls off the barrel and refuses to have dinner with such stupid people, so she would rather eat in the kitchen with the "blue-gummed cook."[21]

Her critical indignation to some extent echoes the author's criticism of the "Bible-belt" mentality, but, as Ralph C. Wood points out, Flannery O'Connor also respected and admired the religious fervor of the Protestants, and did not think in terms of incompatibility between them and the Catholics as far as faith was concerned. Wood offers the following theological explanation:

> O'Connor's profound affinity for Southern Protestant Christianity no way lessened the intensity of her Catholic vision. We learn from her letters that, throughout her adult life, she attended Mass frequently, said her daily prayers out of the Missal, and read from the theology of Thomas Aquinas for twenty minutes every night before bed. Her deeply sacramental Catholicism made her critical, therefore, of the fierce faith that she otherwise admired. Without the sacraments, she lamented, Southern Protestants have nothing to guide their belief or curb their heresies. What remains is only "a do-it-yourself religion… which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic." Yet it was finally sympathy and not disdain that O'Connor felt for these untutored and unsacramental cousins in Christ. She wrote to a fellow Catholic that her theological differences with literal-minded Southern Protestants were "on the nature of the church, not on the nature of God or our obligation to him."[22]

Lo! o'er ancient forms departing
Newer rites of grace prevail;
Faith for all defects supplying,
Where the feeble senses fail.

To the Everlasting Father,
And the Son Who reigns on high
With the Holy Ghost proceeding
Forth from Each eternally,
Be salvation, honour, blessing,
Might and endless majesty.
Amen.

[20] O'Connor: *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, 241.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Wood: *Flannery O'Connor as a Satirist of the Negative Way*, 89.

The most significant accord between O'Connor's Catholic orthodoxy and Southern fundamentalist faith is to be found in their common understanding of the divine activity in its relation to human freedom. They share the mutual conviction that God's prevenient grace can become efficacious only with our freely willed acceptance of it. There is a synergistic union between the divine self-offering and our human acceptance of it: "God rescues us from ourselves, if we want him to."[23]

It seems as if the most important issue for Flannery O'Connor were exactly the gesture of acceptance when writing the story. She wrote in a letter to Betty Hester[24] in December 1955 that she got the closest she can to an illustration of purity as she thinks of it through this story,[25] and she describes purity as "an acceptance of what God wills for us, an acceptance of our individual circumstances."[26] This gesture of acceptance is illustrated by the nameless characters in the work: the child, the mother, the cook and the freak. Quite paradoxically, the fact that these characters do not have names adds to their universal significance: through the emblematic roles they fulfill they constitute an axis in the story. What's more, all of these characters are somewhat problematic from the point of view of sexuality.

It is important that the child, being twelve years old, is before the age of puberty with very vague notions about sexuality and biological reproduction. She imagines that things of medical concern are shown in the tent in the fair where only adults are allowed to go, behind the "faded looking pictures on the canvas of people in tights, with stiff, stretched, composed faces like the faces of the martyrs waiting to have their tongues cut out by the Roman soldier". When desperately wanting to hear the story of the freak, which, according to her cousins, is not for children, she promises them that she would tell them how she saw a rabbit once, having rabbits. The cousins become interested (which may be seen as a proof that they are not so grown-up women, after all, either), but in the end, remembering she had never seen such a thing, the child comes up with the following explanation: "It spit them out of its mouth. Six of them."[27] When she hears about the freak, she cannot imagine how it can be a man and a woman both without two heads, but she doesn't dare to ask. This naïveté is necessary for her to become the understanding and accepting protagonist, able to overcome her limits: both her pride and her shame.

Her mother is the only character not introduced through her bodily defects, it seems as if she did not have a body worth mentioning at all. Her guarded laughter testifies to her self-control. She has a very important and responsible

[23] Ibid.
[24] Betty Hester (1923–1998) American writer.
[25] Kirk: *Critical Companion*, 231.
[26] Quoted in Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, 1999, 80.
[27] O'Connor: *A Temple of the Holy Ghost*, 246.

role: she is the one who provides, understands, organizes and arranges everything and everyone around her house: a creative and able single woman with a good sense of humor, a lot of duties and no time for herself. She is asexual to the extent that one is inclined to believe that she gave birth to the child like the imagined rabbit: by spitting her out of her mouth. Always being in charge, she also has to accept her "individual circumstances," so she, too, can become an example of purity.

The third character, the cook is seemingly absolutely marginal – described with an indication of race but without an indication of gender, the reader never learns if the cook is a man or a woman. The role of this character is to provide the food and to accept the whims of the household – though not without complaint. "Howcome you be so ugly sometime?", the child is asked, and the question is immediately followed by a prophetic warning: "God could strike you deaf dumb and blind and then you wouldn't be as smart as you is!" The child's sassy answer "I would still be smarter than some!"[28] is directed against the other children as well as against the subordinated servant, and it shows that she is not yet ready for the gesture of acceptance. The cook's warning, however, is an anticipation of the freak's imagined speech – this is the first time that God's sovereignty, the possibility of striking anyone anytime is mentioned.

After dinner, the child is given a concrete place of interiority, the privacy of her room where she might prepare for the spiritual experience: she "let the darkness collect and make the room smaller and more private" It is in this darkness that, through its absence, the sun is mentioned again: "She stopped and stood looking out over the dark slopes, past where the pond glinted silver, past the wall of woods to the speckled sky where a long finger of light was revolving up and around and away, searching the air as if it were hunting for the lost sun. It was the beacon light from the fair." The index finger of the searchlight seems to point at the crucial questions: she knows that instead of being a doctor or an engineer, she would have to be a saint "because that was the occupation that included everything you know,"[29] but self-critically she also admits that this is impossible because of her habit of lying, meanness and pride. She keeps musing about becoming a martyr, though, and decides that it would be possible, provided that she is quickly killed. Then, mischievously, she tries to think of something slimy and disgusting to hide in her cousins' bed – but she can't come up with anything, so she says her prayers, thinking of Christ on the road to Calvary and gives thanks that she does not belong to the Church of God like Wendell and Cory. She wakes up when Susan and Joanne arrive, and listens to their story. The "you know what," the description of the

[28] Ibid., 242.
[29] Ibid., 242–243.

freak (who in fact had a particular name, except the girls forgot it) has a great impression on the child:

> The tent where it was had been divided into two parts by a black curtain, one side for men and one for women. The freak went from one side to the other, talking first to the men and then to the women, but everyone could hear. The stage ran all the way across the front. The girls heard the freak say to the men, "I'm going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way." The freak had a country voice, slow and nasal and neither high nor low, just flat. "God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way. I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute hit." Then there was a long silence on the other side of the tent and finally the freak left the men and came over onto the women's side and said the same thing.[30]

The division of the tent, the separation of men and women, the gentle submission of the speaker to the will of God suggests a ritual already the first time the freak's words are heard in the story. The hermaphrodite asks the audience to behave like ladies and gentlemen, so there cannot be anything "ungentlemanly," vulgar or obscene about the exhibition, the speaker rather convinces the audience of some profound insight and understanding. (One might remember that in Greek mythology Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes had been transformed into a woman for seven years and the experience provided him with a deeper sense of wisdom.) Before falling asleep, the child envisions a church service conducted by the freak, with the congregation constantly echoing "Amen. Amen." It is in this part of the text that Paul's letter to the Corinthians is quoted, and the freak's gesture comes together with the phrase that felt like a present to the child.

> "God done this to me and I praise Him."
> "Amen. Amen."
> "He could strike you thisaway."
> "Amen. Amen."
> "But he has not."
> "Amen."
> "Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God's temple, don't you know? Don't you know? God's spirit has a dwelling in you, don't you know?"
> "Amen. Amen."

[30] Ibid., 245.

> "If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing. Amen. Amen."
> "I am a temple of the Holy Ghost."
> "Amen."
>
> The people began to slap their hands without making a loud noise and with a regular beat between the Amens, more and more softly, as if they knew there was a child near, half asleep.[31]

The mystery that happens in this half-dream is strengthened by the events of the next day: as they take the girls back to Mount St. Scholastica, from the car, the child notices the "ivory sun," "framed in the middle of the blue afternoon."[32] At the convent, they are welcomed by a big moon-faced nun (whom the child does not want to kiss or hug, so she firmly shakes her hand), and they all participate in the holy service of Eucharistic adoration. They sing the "Tantum Ergo" (now in its proper context), and the child suddenly realizes that she is in the presence of God.

> Her mind began to get quiet and empty but when the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, "I don't dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be."[33]

After the church service, the big nun still manages to hug the child, "mashing the side of her face in the crucifix hitched onto her belt" – so she has the (unpleasant) physical sensation of the touch of the cross. Then on the way home, in the car, she "looked out over a stretch of pasture land that rose and fell with a gathering greenness until it touched the dark woods. The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees."[34]

These are the last words of the story, this is what the reader is left with. How could we follow the red clay road? It might remind us of the one in Milledgeville, Georgia, leading to Andalusia, the farm home where O'Connor lived with her mother. And it might be noticed how the text is abundant in autobiographic elements. The mystery of the body the author had to come to terms with was the result of pain and suffering, a constant fight with an incurable disease and a constant elevation with the experience of the Eucharist. When Mary McCarthy, who had left the church, called the Eucharist a good symbol, Flannery O'Connor cried out: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it!" She stated

[31] Ibid., 246.
[32] Ibid., 247.
[33] Ibid., 248.
[34] Ibid.

that the Eucharist was the center of her existence and this was all she would be able to say on the matter outside of her fiction.[35] Remembering the sentence quoted above, "God rescues us from ourselves, if we want him to", we may see a unique gesture of acceptance on the part of the author.

The reader likewise has the opportunity to reject or accept the celebrated embodiments of interiority: the body of the text, together with the bodies of the characters mentioned, the heavenly bodies and the body of Christ. All this might be measured against the mystery of one's own bodily existence and, being self-critical enough, one might find abundant material for merciless caricatures. However, beside any of the possible "ungentlemanly" thoughts, one might also perpetuate the words of Sister Perpetua, taking them as a well-wrapped present: "Please stop! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!"

[35] Quoted in Kirk: *Critical Companion*, 231.

INITIATION AND ITS TRAVESTY IN "THE RIVER" BY FLANNERY O'CONNOR[1]

Flannery O'Connor, the deeply devoted Catholic writer of the American South deals with the problem of initiation into the mysteries in many of her short stories. She is also famous for her frequent themes of violence and tragedy – which she handles with a special sense of grotesque humor. In "The River"[2] a four- or five-year-old boy, Harry Ashfield is taken to a religious meeting by Mrs. Connin, his occasional babysitter, at which he is ceremonially immersed in the river by a faith healer, Bevel Summers to be free and to "count" – and the day after the event he goes back to the river all by himself, to repeat the immersion, in search of the kingdom of Christ, and drowns. My essay wishes to investigate the extent to which the text is a deliberate travesty of the ritual of baptism and the extent to which the initiation is indeed to be taken seriously. As the author claims, most of her stories contain a "moment of grace". The challenging question is if and where this moment is to be found in this particular text.

It is significant that in the morning when she takes the child from home, Mrs. Connin does not know his first name and Harry, after hearing about the faith healer, says his name is also Bevel, which the babysitter takes literally and thinks of it as a special coincidence. Thus, in terms of naming, the child might unconsciously or jokingly baptize himself, at least in the sense of repeating and taking up the name of the preacher before being immersed in the river.

Like in many of O'Connor's works, names are symbolic here as well: the Ashfields, Harry's quite negligent parents live a life of partying, their apartment is full of dirty ashtrays – they do not seem to care much about where exactly their sleepy son is going at 6 AM on Sunday with the drowsy babysitter (who, by the way, is taking the boy after a night-shift of cleaning somewhere else). In the chilly autumn morning, it is only the preacher's last name, Summers, that might remind the boy (and the reader) of warmth. Later in the story, at the healing event, the skeptic criticism of the preacher's words comes from a man with a scary and distorted face called Mr. Paradise – at the very end of the story, it is Mr. Paradise who tries to save the child from drowning by running after him with a one-foot-long candy stick – all in vain. Through the

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Initiation and its Travesty in "The River" by Flannery O'Connor, in Anikó Daróczi et al. (eds.): *Initiation into the Mysteries*, KRE–L'Harmattan, Budapest, 2020, 285–293.

[2] Flannery O'Connor: The River, in R. Giroux (ed.): *The Complete Stories*, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, New York, 1996, 157–175.

homophone, Mr. Paradise's name seems to *parodize*, make a parody of any Christian message, thus turning the moment of grace into its travesty. I will return to the possible interpretations of the name Bevel as well.

Ralph C. Wood, in his careful and thorough analysis of the story, says the following:

> In "The River", as with all of her stories, O'Connor presses her readers to drastic conclusions. In this regard, they share the hard-edged quality of Jesus's parables and sayings. For example, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:25) or "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor" (Luke 18:22). So must we decide whether Preacher Summers and Mrs. Connin have done Harry a terrible and final violence, or whether they have given him the most important of all gifts – eternal life. There is no humanistic way of avoiding such a drastic either-or. The story's dire outcome cannot be justified by insisting that the child unfortunately literalized the preacher's message and thus mistakenly ended his own life. The story would thus become a trite exercise in the sentimentality that O'Connor despised. She likened sentimentality in both morality and religion to pornography in art: it is a cheap and easy way of achieving a bogus effect. Yet neither does O'Connor encourage any quick and conveniently Christian verdict.[3]

The drastic either-or seems to suggest a division between religious or secular interpretation: one either believes that the young boy is truly baptized and in his case the long human search for the kingdom of Christ is radically hastened, i.e. "short-circuited" – or one sees the case as a tragedy, as the outcome of human irresponsibility on the part of the parents, the babysitter and the preacher. If Harry's case is shown up against a culture in which "death is the ultimate enemy and remaining alive at all costs is the ultimate good", as Wood argues, then to die a "meaningless" death "in devotion to a non-existent kingdom" must be "the ultimate lie."[4] But it is also debatable to what extent a religious reading might allow a positive interpretation, whether any responsible religious adult can rejoice in the drastic conclusion.

So perhaps the either-or refers to the division between the perspective of the adult or the child: Flannery O'Connor seems to focalize almost entirely on the child's perspective. All the more so, because the adult characters, especially the parents, are shown to be more like children in their irresponsibility. As Richard Giannone points out,

[3] Ralph C. Wood: The scandalous Baptism of Harry Ashfield in Flannery O'Connor's "The River", in J. H. McMullen – J. P. Peede (eds.): *Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor Sacrament, Sacramental and the Sacred in Her Fiction*, Macon, GA, Mercer University Press, 2007, 190.

[4] Ibid.

> Where parents are children – as are the Ashfields – their children must parent themselves, for children's basic inner needs cannot be grasped or answered by the parents. O'Connor points up the spiritual chasm by having the narrator call Harry "the little boy" (158) to remind us of his neediness, whereas Harry's father calls his son "old man" (158) to hasten the child's independence. The paternal endearment is accurate. In Harry's need to be taken seriously, the four-or-five-year-old is more mature than his parents. Harry hears no call from the pulpit, […] since church is not part of the Ashfields' social faith. But the call to flee nevertheless comes to Harry. Before he hears the words, he feels the need to count – which is the need for God without using the word *God*.[5]

From the adult's perspective, Harry's weakness, abandonment and vulnerability is shown by the narrator and felt by the reader, making the reading experience almost impossible to bear. Harry is introduced half asleep, with runny nose and eyes, his arms stuck in the sleeves of his coat. No wonder that Mrs. Connin's first remark is: "He ain't fixed right," to which Harry's father answers "Well then for Christ's sake fix him,"[6] unaware of the terrible possibility that the babysitter will try to do precisely what he asks of her. To what extent does Harry get "fixed" "for Christ's sake"?

From the child's perspective, this day is full of new experiences. He carefully studies everything he encounters: the flowery handkerchief of Mrs. Connin, which he can "borry", the pictures on the wall of Mrs. Connin's apartment, the old book about the life of Jesus Christ for readers under twelve, which he hides in the lining of his coat. He learns that he had been made by this carpenter – whereas earlier he had thought it had been "a doctor named Sladewall" and the name Christ "was a word like 'oh' or 'damn', or maybe somebody who had cheated them out of something sometime."[7] Before they start out for the healing, he encounters Mrs. Connin's four children, Sarah Mildred, "who had her hair up in so many aluminum curlers that it glared like the roof"[8] and the three boys, who play a nasty trick on him by telling him to loosen the plank of the pigsty to see the pigs, and he is knocked over and chased to Mrs. Connin by a young long-legged and humpbacked hog with a distorted ear. All the more can he appreciate the picture in Mrs. Connin's old book in which he sees Jesus chasing many pigs out of a man. On the way to the river, he is amazed by nature: as an urban child, he had never been in the woods before. He takes his steps carefully in the forest, as if he was entering "a strange country", and as they get to the clearing by the river, he feels exhilarated by the sunny landscape.

[5] Richard Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist*, Urbana–Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2000, 93.
[6] O'Connor: *The River*, 157.
[7] Ibid., 163.
[8] Ibid.

He is observing the congregation gathered around the young preacher standing in the river from the shelter of Mrs. Connin's coat, listens to the song and to the repeated words of the faith healer.

> "Listen to what I got to say, you people! There ain't but one river and that's the River of Life, made out of Jesus' Blood. That's the river you have to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus' Blood, you people!"
>
> His voice grew soft and musical. "All the rivers come from that one River and go back to it like it was the ocean sea and if you believe, you can lay your pain in that River and can get rid of it because that's the River that was made to carry sin. It's a River full of pain itself, pain itself, moving toward the Kingdom of Christ, to be washed away, slow, you people, slow as this here old red water river round my feet."[9]

When Mrs. Connin holds him up to be baptized by the preacher, he repeats his chosen name in a loud jaunty voice, but when he tries to make a joke of it in the crook of the preacher's arm, saying "My name is Bevvvuuuul", letting "the tip of his tongue slide across his mouth,"[10] he is surprised to see that the preacher doesn't smile. So far, he had only been picked up by adults for the sake of joking. Now that he sees something serious is going to happen, he quickly adds a lie to the joke: "My mother named me that."[11]

> "Have you ever been Baptized?" the preacher asked.
> "What's that?" he murmured.
> "If I Baptize you," the preacher said, "you'll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You'll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you'll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?"
> "Yes," the child said and thought, I won't go back to the apartment then, I'll go under the river.
> "You won't be the same again," the preacher said. "You'll count."[12]

Then the preacher turns him upside down and holds him under the water while saying the words of baptism. The shock of the gesture makes the boy silent – and the next day, after experiencing that at the apartment he doesn't "count" (in the evening, the parents make mocking remarks at what happened to him during the day, he sleeps in his wet clothes and wakes up to see the ruins of a party and his parents in an exhausted sleep), he makes a peanut butter sandwich for himself, eats it, carefully rubs the contents of an ashtray into the carpet,

[9] Ibid., 165.
[10] Ibid., 167.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., 168.

takes a bus token and half a pack of "life savers" candies from his mother's purse and starts on his fateful journey.

It must also be stated that the careless parents are far from being "evil": they simply take the boy to be a part of their belongings, and think that they provide for him as best as they can: he has a lot of toys (as soon as he destroys them, he gets new ones), there is food in the fridge, they often take him to restaurants, and if they have no time for him, his care is a problem to be solved. They try to turn his whims into jokes – perhaps in the hope that through humor, all the anomalies of their lives can be dissolved. In their sleep, they, too, are vulnerable, exposed to the horrible surprise of losing their "belonging". The boy leaves the house behind without taking anything except the candies (the "life savers" will prove to be useful against the candy-stick of Mr. Paradise) and lets his feet guide him back to the river.

Richard Giannone also observes that the child's half-conscious drive toward the Kingdom of Christ happens through a series of *gestures*: it is hands and feet that guide him, not thoughts or conviction. Flannery O'Connor herself found the role of gestures decisively important in her own works. In her collection of essays *Mystery and Manners*, she says the following:

> I often ask myself what makes a story work, what makes it hold up as a story, and I have decided that it is probably some action, some gesture of a character that is unlike any other in the story, one which indicates where the real heart of the story lies. This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery.[13]

It is remarkable, that in the first paragraph of "The River", the father pushes the boy "toward a pale spotted hand that stuck through the half-open door,"[14] Mrs. Connin is only later shown as a full (skeleton-like) figure. And when the child finally plunges under the water, "the waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down."[15] These two gestures seem reliable in getting the child somewhere, making contact with both the world and eternity. In the text, hands are mentioned several times, when

[13] O'Connor: On Her Own Work, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 111.
[14] O'Connor: *The River*, 157.
[15] Ibid., 174.

the boy doesn't speak, it is through the pressure of hands that he communicates. His feet are equally important: the idea of returning to the river comes through feeling his still wet shoes, and it is his feet that will remember the way. Faces, however, seem to be obstacles in the journey: the face of the pig pushed towards his own, the eyes of an owl or a squirrel frightening him in the forest, the distorted face of Mr. Paradise. Before the river accepts him, it, too, "pushes him back in the face" several times. Does this mean that the story upholds something that is impossible to face? That the mystery into which the boy is initiated will never be shown face to face?

In the concluding paragraphs, I would like to return to Ralph C. Wood's implied imperative of either-or, referring to the hard edge of Flannery O'Connor's stories and Jesus Christ's parables. And it is in this context that I wish to examine the meaning of the word *bevel*. From the point that the child names himself this way, the narrator calls him Bevel, although it has been stated that his real name was Harry. Perhaps the either-or refers to this seemingly insignificant distinction, whether he is to be seen as Harry or as Bevel.

According to *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*,

> **bevel** is a slanted surface or edge on a piece of wood, glass, etc. A bevel is typically used to soften the edge of a piece for the sake of safety, wear resistance, aesthetics; or to facilitate mating with another piece.[16]

Would this definition soften the hard edge of the parable? Or make it perhaps even harder to accept? It seems that by definition a bevel facilitates the mating of two surfaces, perhaps turning the imperative of the either-or to an acceptance of both, conjoined. In my interpretation, both the travesty and the mystery are to be taken seriously: one cannot exist without the other in this story, and it is precisely the unconsciously or jokingly chosen name, Bevel that connects them. Can we then call the boy's experience a true revelation? I think this cannot be stated from an earthly dimension and it must be kept in mind that all responses to the story are inevitably from an earthly dimension! I would suggest the word "Bevelation" instead: which would be true to the individual story, the child's own, unique, unrepeatable case – which cannot, in any circumstances be universalized, only to the extent to which each and every human being might experience the surprising, shocking, unique and unrepeatable case of his or her own.

[16] bevel, in Joseph H. Friend – David B. Guralnik (eds.): *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College edition, Cleveland – New York, The World Publishing Company, 1953; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bevel

THE BREATH OF THE IMAGINARY AND GESTURES OF THE ORDINARY IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "GOOD COUNTRY PEOPLE"

The interplay between the Imaginary and the Ordinary is an ever-exciting topic both of philosophy and of literary studies. In the present essay, I wish to focus on this interplay through the close reading of a short story in which questions of philosophy and problems of the human heart are equally important. I take both 'breath' and 'gestures' as tentative, unfinished textual signs of the non-verbal disclosure of the characters' disposition and I hope to arrive at a possible response to the quite shocking existential exposure of the protagonist, which the reader has to face at the end of the story.

In order to make clearer in what sense I intend to talk about the two basic terms, the Imaginary and the Ordinary, I turn to two important books bearing these terms in their titles, respectively: Wolfgang Iser's *The Fictive and the Imaginary* and Stanley Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary*. Iser makes a distinction between the Fictive and the Imaginary on the basis of concreteness, graspability and guided action in the following passage:

> In our ordinary experience, the imaginary tends to manifest itself in a somewhat diffuse manner, in fleeting impressions that defy our attempts to pin it down in a concrete and stabilized form. The imaginary may suddenly flash before our mind's eye, almost as an arbitrary apparition, only to disappear again or to dissolve into quite another form. […] The act of fictionalizing […] is not equivalent to the imaginary with its protean potential. For the fictionalizing act is a guided act. It aims at something which in turn endows the imaginary with an articulate gestalt – a gestalt that differs from the fantasies, projections, daydreams and other reveries that ordinarily give the imaginary expression in our day-to-day experience. […] Just as the fictionalizing act outstrips the determinacy of the real, so it provides the imaginary with the determinacy that it would not otherwise possess.[1]

It seems to me that for Wolfgang Iser, the act of fictionalizing provides the creative thinker with a possibility to *extend* or *expand* the experience of the ordinary (or real) by way of articulating the otherwise diffuse notion of the imaginary. In Stanley Cavell's view, however, it seems that the task of the creative thinker in positioning him- or herself with regard to skepticism is to

[1] Iser: *The Fictive and the Imaginary*, 3.

discover the experience of the ordinary. He holds up Wittgenstein's example in the following paragraph:

> [Wittgenstein] takes the drift toward skepticism as the *discovery* of the everyday, a discovery of exactly *what* it is that skepticism would deny. It turns out to be something that the very impulse to philosophy, the impulse to take thought about our lives, inherently seeks to deny, as if what philosophy is dissatisfied by is inherently the everyday.
>
> So the everyday is not merely one topic among others that philosophers might take an interest in, but one that a philosopher is fated to an interest in so long as he or she seeks a certain kind of response to a threat of skepticism. […] The everyday is what we cannot but aspire to, since it appears to us as lost to us. This is what Thoreau means when he says, […] "The phenomena of the year take place every day in a pond on a small scale." That is, there is nothing beyond the succession of each and every day; and grasping a day, accepting the everyday, the ordinary, is not a given but a task.[2]

Perhaps I do not go too far when I suggest that for Cavell, the imaginary might be the capacity with which one could be able to grasp, accept, discover the ordinary. In Flannery O'Connor's story, such an attempt is made by several of the characters and in most cases, the vague attempts end in failure.

The protagonist is a thirty-two-year-old woman, Joy (who legally changed her name to Hulga), with a Ph.D. in philosophy and a wooden leg (both of which conditions are equally disadvantageous according to her mother, Mrs. Hopewell). On top of all that, Hulga also has a serious heart condition. She reacts to all these problems by a sarcastic and critical attitude and a deliberately rude and infantile behavior. The story is set in the rural South of the United States and in spite of all the mother's efforts to make life cozy and nice, their ordinary existence is dull and hopeless, their only 'program' seems to be listening to the gossipy stories of the talkative neighbor, their tenant worker's wife, Mrs. Freeman. The dull routine of the two women's everyday life is disturbed by the appearance of a Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, a simple-minded descendant of 'good country people' who claims to have a heart condition, similar to Hulga's. The mother is touched to the point of inviting him for dinner (which she immediately regrets after having uttered the invitation), and Hulga, drawn to him through the recognition that they both 'may die' any time, agrees to go on a date with him the following day. At night, she imagines a seduction scene through which she could instruct his inferior mind, as if she "took all his shame away and turned it into something useful."[3] Next morning,

[2] Cavell: *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 170–171.

[3] Flannery O'Connor: Good Country People, in R. Giroux (ed.): *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, 284.

however, it is she who is carried away by the man in whom she imagines to have discovered true innocence but he proves to be a scoundrel, stealing her wooden leg as well as her glasses and abandoning her completely in the attic of a barn. In the meantime, Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman are digging up 'evil smelling' onions in the back pasture – the story ends with them making platitudinal comments on the simplicity of the Bible salesman leaving in the distance.

Having heard this all too concise summary of the dreary plot, one adequate response might be crying out: "Oh, how depressing!" The breath the text gives off is rather of the evil smelling onions – why, of all stories, would this piece be an appropriate example of the miraculous work of the Imaginary? I wish to answer this question on three different levels: appealing first to the author's, then to the characters' and finally to the reader's imaginative power and their ability to find a place "where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet and each imbue itself with the nature of the other."[4] This quotation is from the Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and indeed, Flannery O'Connor is among the "women writers in the Hawthorne tradition" according to Emily Miller Budick in her book, *Engendering Romance*.[5] Flannery O'Connor, like Hawthorne, is trying to master a delicate balance, being excited and tortured by ethical and theological issues and remaining ambiguous in her conclusions. In her writings, she presents a rare distillment, an exquisite blend of grotesque humor, downright violence and faint signs of vulnerability. All of these are expressions of the two contradictory factors she equally feels determined by: her Southern sense of belonging and her absolute devotion to the Catholic faith. In spite of the painful violence in most of her texts, she claims to have been searching for and showing up 'a moment of grace' in her stories – which, since she wants to avoid all sentimentality, might as well be fatal to the characters. "Good Country People" is confessedly one of her most autobiographic writings, and as Louise Westling points out, the author admits in a letter: "there was less conscious technical control in GCP than in any other story I've ever written."[6] In her collection of essays *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor says the following about the story:

> I once wrote a story called "Good Country People", in which a lady Ph.D. has her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman whom she has tried to seduce. Now I'll admit that, paraphrased this way, the situation is simply a low joke. The average reader

[4] Nathaniel Hawthorne: *The Scarlet Letter.* ed. and intro. B. Harding. Oxford – New York, Oxford University Press, 1990, 36.

[5] Emily Miller Budick: *Engendering Romance: Women Writers in the Hawthorne Tradition, 1850–1990*, Yale University Press, 1994.

[6] Louise Westling: *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens. The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1985, 150.

> is pleased to observe anybody's wooden leg being stolen. But without ceasing to appeal to him and without making any statements of high intention, this story does manage to operate at another level of experience, by letting the wooden leg accumulate meaning. Early in the story, we are presented with the fact that the Ph.D. is spiritually as well as physically crippled. She believes in nothing but her own belief in nothing, and we perceive that there is a wooden part of her soul that corresponds to her wooden leg. Now of course this is never stated. The fiction writer states as little as possible. The reader makes this connection from things he is shown. He may not even know that he makes the connection, but the connection is there nevertheless, and it has its effect on him. As the story goes on, the wooden leg continues to accumulate meaning. The reader learns how the girl feels about her leg, how her mother feels about it, how the country woman on the place feels about it, and finally, by the time the Bible salesman comes along, the leg has accumulated so much meaning that it is, as the saying goes, loaded. And when the Bible salesman steals it, the reader realizes that he has taken away part of the girl's personality and has revealed her deeper affliction to her for the first time.[7]

In spite of her acknowledgement of little technical control, Flannery O'Connor gives the impression of having carefully measured out the possible effects of her text, suggesting a concrete way of interpretation. This might testify to the way in which she herself may, in the Cavellian sense, discover 'the ordinary' in her immediate surroundings. At this point, I do not wish to go into detail concerning the autobiographical references, to what extent she might portray her own illness and broken career in the plight of Hulga-Joy – or her relationship with her mother in the troubled connection between Hulga and Mrs. Hopewell. Suffice it to say that she manages to come to terms with a set of problems and, using her imaginative power, she succeeds in creating the persona of the writer, fully in control of her job and her actions, capable of enduring the drawbacks of the ordinary through the help of, one may say, the Iserian act of fictionalizing, a guided action, providing the diffuse imaginary with the determinacy it would not otherwise possess.

The device of coming to terms with the ordinary and making life livable with the help of imagination seems to be followed by all the characters of the story. They all have speaking names, indicative of either the values or the shortcomings they seem to represent. The most prominent portrayal of the ordinary as vulgarity or short-sighted but self-confident disposition is presented by Mrs. Freeman. As her name indicates, she feels free to intrude upon the privacy of Hulga and her mother any time and she has a masculine-like strength and energy. She constantly returns to the topic of her daughters, Glynese and Carramae (whom Hulga dubbed 'Glycerin' and 'Caramel') – the latter only

[7] O'Connor: Writing Short Stories, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 99.

fifteen but already married and pregnant. Mrs. Freeman would faithfully record how many times Carramae had thrown up in the morning, in order to keep track of events both usual and unusual. She has a peculiar interest in all kinds of illnesses and deformities – so she might be seen as a forerunner of Manley Pointer in being fascinated by Hulga's wooden leg. Her imagination is indicative of how gossip works and it is indeed gossip that keeps her alive. Her sudden visits are a constant threat to Mrs. Hopewell, as if she were checking, controlling, and in a strange way, authorizing their way of life and value system.

> Mrs. Freeman always managed to arrive at some point during the meal and to watch them finish it. She would stand in the doorway if it were summer but in the winter she would stand with one elbow on the refrigerator and look down on them, or she would stand by the gas heater, lifting the back of her skirt slightly. Occasionally she would stand against the wall and roll her head from side to side. At no time was she in any hurry to leave.[8]

In order to endure such a suffocating presence, Mrs. Hopewell needs a great amount of fresh air – perhaps through her own 'breath of the imaginary'. Her speaking name indicates that she is always trying to see the bright side of things around her – she convinces herself that the Freemans are "good country people", far from being "trash" like her former tenants, and Glynese and Carramae are "two of the finest girls she ever knew."[9] With her self-sacrificing behavior, she wishes to compensate for Hulga's deliberate rudeness, and she gains strength from repeating commonplace clichés like "Nothing is perfect!", "That is life!", "Everybody is different". Or "Good country people are the salt of the earth". When she addresses Manley Pointer with a bunch of these, even he cries out: "You said a mouthful!"[10] These aphorisms are like mantras for Mrs. Hopewell – they help her feel better and create a more justifiable everyday life. To Hulga, these sayings would provide the basis of a life-lie. Mrs. Hopewell probably regrets that she is unable to pass this wisdom onto her daughter, the same way as she regrets the special type of wisdom Hulga chose to study: philosophy.

> […] this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss, You could say, "My daughter is a nurse", or "My daughter is a schoolteacher", or even "My daughter is a chemical engineer". You could not say, "My daughter is a philosopher." That was something that had ended with the Greeks and Romans.[11]

When she glances into her daughter's book and reads: "Science wishes to know

[8] O'Connor: *Good Country People*, 273.
[9] Ibid., 272.
[10] Ibid., 279.
[11] Ibid., 276.

nothing of nothing", she quickly shuts the volume as if she had come across some "evil incantation in gibberish."[12]

Hulga feels extremely annoyed by her mother's cliché-statements – probably because she is sensitive to their emptiness and artificiality. One of the most memorable gestures in the story is her outburst at the table as a reaction to her mother's statement that "a smile never hurt anyone"[13] I quote the entire passage because as a gesture, it is uniquely revealing – the passage is related from the point of view of Mrs. Hopewell, showing the mother's thoughts about her daughter:

> She was brilliant but she didn't have a grain of sense. It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year she grew less like others and more like herself – bloated, rude and squint-eyed. And she said such strange things! To her own mother she had said – without warning, without excuse, standing up in the middle of a meal with her face purple and her mouth half full – "Woman! Do you ever look inside? Do you ever look inside and see what you are not? God!" she had cried, sinking down again and staring at her plate, "Malebranche was right: we are not our own light. We are not our own light."[14]

The most touching element in this scene is not so much the criticism of superficiality or the reference to Nicholas Malebranche (1638–1715), the Cartesian thinker who was far from being an atheist or nihilist the way Hulga confesses herself to be, but the fact that Hulga says this "with her mouth half full". This small detail (unconscious exposure of Hulga's vulnerability) seems to justify Mrs. Hopewell in thinking of her as a child, but it also foreshadows the final scene of the protagonist's complete exposure. Hulga exposes herself with other gestures of the ordinary as well, e.g. when she puts vapex detergent on the collar of her dirty white shirt before the date because she has no perfume. These gestures, on the one hand, confirm her humanity and show up some kind of innocence, and on the other hand, they testify to the exceptionally cruel critical and self-critical potentials of the author.

In terms of imagination, Hulga's most creative act was the choice of her name – according to her mother, she deliberately chose the ugliest name she could come across. Hulga is proud of it because of "her vision of the name working like the ugly sweating Vulcan who stayed in the furnace and to whom, presumably, the goddess had to come when called"[15] I wonder if either she or the author had been aware that although the name 'Hulga' might be connected

[12] Ibid., 277.
[13] Ibid., 276.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., 275.

with 'threat', 'Helga' (a variant of the name) in fact meant 'holy' in Norwegian, so in its Scandinavian meaning it was not at all far from 'joy'.

Hulga's imagination is at work during the night before her date with the Bible salesman (the phrase "she imagined" occurs four times in a short paragraph). In her fantasies, the imaginary remains diffuse until her brain, her brilliant cognitive power proves to be stronger. But when she thinks she is in control of her thoughts and actions, she is misled and cheated. After her imagined recognition of having encountered true innocence, she allows Manley Pointer to take her wooden leg off, and this gesture is like complete surrender: "It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his."[16] It is precisely in this moment that she gets the real blow: the Bibles turn out to be hollow and Manley Pointer takes diabolically symbolic objects out of them: a flask of whisky, a pack of cards with obscene pictures and a box of condoms. As Louise Westling observes:

> […] he will violate her trust and her physical and emotional integrity more completely by stealing her leg than the normal physical rape could ever have done. O'Connor has taken the significance of rape to a symbolic extreme in the picture of this man who preys sexually on women and literally leaves them crippled.[17]

When he finally leaves her after this spiritual rape, she seems to encounter the Iserian diffuse imaginary: without her glasses, she sees the blurred image of a lake instead of the fields they had come across, and Manley Pointer's image seems to walk on water (thus mocking a Christ figure, as it has been pointed out by Frederick Asals and other critics).[18]

Manley Pointer's name is not only well-chosen because of the obvious allusion to sexuality but also because, as Hulga in a gesture of her own ultimate innocence perceives it, "he had touched the truth about her,"[19] he could point at her vulnerability. But, being a scoundrel, his name is not authentic: when it turns out that he is a perverse collector of crippled women's prostheses of any kind, he starts boasting:

> "One time, I got a woman's glass eye this way. And you needn't think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at and don't stay nowhere long. And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga", he said,

[16] Ibid., 289.
[17] Westling: *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, 153.
[18] Frederick Asals: *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, Athens, University of Georgia Press, 1982.
[19] O'Connor: *Good Country People*, 289.

> using the name as if he didn't think much of it, "you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!"[20]

All this is in grotesque and brutal contrast with his assumed innocence, the fact that he, during the awkward seduction scene is more like a child than a man: "his breath was sweet and clear like a child's and the kisses were sticky like a child's."[21] He must be an exceptionally talented actor – since neither Mrs. Hopewell nor Hulga suspects anything wrong about him except his extreme simplicity. (Although Hulga, who used to look at nice young men "as if she could smell their stupidity,"[22] might have been alarmed by the absence of such a sensation when meeting the Bible salesman for the first time.) Perhaps his clumsy gestures were completely convincing about his genuine disposition, e.g. when he "prevented his peas from sliding onto the table by blocking them with a piece of bread he later cleaned his plate with."

It is Manley Pointer in connection with whom 'breathing', 'breath' and 'panting' is most often mentioned. The frequent references to his respiration might indicate how he manages to *inspire* Hulga, how the breath of something vague and imaginary reaches her through him. It must be remembered that Hulga had never been kissed before and she cannot have too many hopes of anyone falling in love with her ever again. It can also be argued that, in spite of her critical thinking, she is actually carried away by a platitude during their first conversation, when Manley calls her a "brave sweet little thing."[23] None of these attributes are true at the moment when the phrase is uttered, so the young man in fact addresses and excites a certain aspect of the imaginary. Manley's imagination in turn is captured by the wooden leg – so his fascination is with the artificial. Still, he manages to stir something authentic in her. Does his nasty behavior retrospectively ruin the authenticity of her innocent surrender? Can Hulga's final ability to surrender be seen as the moment of grace? Or is it in her final exposure that the lack of caring, the lack of reassurance makes her recognize her condition, and, like a tragic hero, she all of a sudden experiences anagnorisis although her vision is blurred? Making the lack of grace the moment of grace would perhaps rely too much on the reader's imaginative power. What happens to Hulga afterwards? Will she have a heart attack and die? Or will she be found by the two women and will she be taken back into the house, humiliated and ashamed, having to endure more and more of the dull and unpleasant ordinariness?

To me it seems that a more adequate response could be at this point to put the flashes of our diffuse readerly 'imaginary' aside and focus on words of the

[20] Ibid., 291.
[21] Ibid., 287.
[22] Ibid., 276.
[23] Ibid., 283.

text that gain a new literal meaning in the context of the moment when Hulga is abandoned.

(1) Earlier, when Manley Pointer had first asked about the family Bible, Mrs. Hopewell said: "I keep my Bible by my bedside". And the narrator adds: "This was not the truth. It was in the attic somewhere."[24] Here, in the *attic*, the loft of the barn, the literally useless, hollow Bible was shown to Hulga.

(2) In their conversation, Manley Pointer uses biblical language in a pious way: "[...] 'He who losest his life shall find it', he said simply and he was so sincere, so genuine and earnest that Mrs. Hopewell would not for the world have smiled".[25] The words of the gospel are repeated when Hulga surrenders: "It was like losing her own life and finding it again, miraculously, in his."[26]

In the final scene of the abandonment, when Hulga has, indeed, lost her life, would there be any promising sign that she might also find it?

(3) In Hulga's book, Mrs. Hopewell reads: "science wishes to know nothing of nothing."[27] During the walk toward the barn, Hulga explains to the young man how she believes in nothing.

In the attic, this is precisely what she gets. In what way is her experience a confirmation of her belief?

(4) As an answer to Hulga's reluctance to help her walk over the fields, "Mrs. Hopewell would say: 'If you can't come pleasantly, I don't want you at all', to which the girl, standing square and rigid-shouldered with her neck thrust slightly forward, would reply, 'If you want me, here I am – LIKE I AM.'"[28]

Now, in the final scene this originally impertinent and hostile remark might be the only possible literal response to an imaginary call: 'Hulga, where are you?', acknowledging her existential nakedness. I feel that in this sentence the breath of the imaginary and a gesture of the ordinary may meet, and that the sentence may be shared by character, author and reader. It may be seen both as an extension and as a discovery of one's personal universe if one can utter the sentence "Here I am – LIKE I AM" in the language of faith.

It is at this point that I come to my concluding question about the realm of 'the almost'. I feel that at the end of the story, Hulga *almost* experiences a moment of grace. What is fascinating in the word "almost" is the contradiction: to what extent is an "almost" a "yes", and to what extent is it a "no"? Of course, logically, and from the point of view of the final result, it can only be a "no": whoever *almost* reaches a goal, doesn't reach it. And yet, from the point of view

[24] Ibid., 278.
[25] Ibid., 280.
[26] Ibid., 289.
[27] Ibid., 277.
[28] Ibid., 274.

of intention, effort and future possibilities, the word might carry a great amount of "yes": a suggestion that maybe next time, the goal will be reached.

Hulga indeed loses everything in the end, she remains abandoned even by the narrator. She fails in her belief, since it is impossible to believe in nothing. She can no longer rely on her imagination or intuition, she had misjudged her situation. This would imply that the author cannot present a successful moment of grace, 'the ordinary' remains vulgar, dull and hopeless. Understanding the word 'almost' in this way, the reader will probably comprehend a depressive conclusion.

However, it must also be taken into consideration that in the end, Hulga finally goes through a serious change of perspective (her eyeglasses are also stolen), and the change is not necessarily for the worse. Her experience provides her with an existential nakedness that might be seen as a precondition for a moment of grace. The author is critical and cruel but sincere: recognizing the truth can also be cathartic. There is a possibility of a discovery of the ordinary: without the ordinary gestures and circumstances with all their negative connotations, the *need* for divine intervention would not be so evident and powerful. Thus, the appreciation of the ordinary may become important for the author, the reader and even the exposed character of Hulga, and the odor of the evil smelling onions may prove to be less penetrating than the fragrant breath of the imaginary.

VARIETIES OF DISPLACEMENT IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S "THE DISPLACED PERSON"[1]

This story by Flannery O'Connor presents a complexity of xenophobia, discrimination and displacement. It is a bit longer than the "classical" examples of the genre according to Poe or Hemingway, altogether forty-one pages.[2] It can be "read at one sitting", though, and it provides the "unity of effect": uncanny bafflement at where one belongs and to what extent one may get alienated from one's own environment. The story has three parts, and at the end of each, a more or less surprising new level of displacement is disclosed. The text can also be seen as the "tip of the iceberg" in the sense that it shows only one set of examples to the various ways in which the notions of the "us" and the "them" may sweeten as well as poison the lives of allegedly free individuals in the United States – and elsewhere, all around the world. As David Griffith argues in his essay "The Displaced Person. Reading Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Islamophobia," the story "carries a dark moral force without recourse to didacticism or sentimentality."[3]

Concerning the form of the text, William Burke's excellent observations are worth considering:

> Each of the story's three sections is presented in a different narrative form, so that the acts of community dissolution dramatized in the three sections are embodied in literary acts that suggest the instability of a central literary strategy, the absence of a necessary principle of form. Each section, that is, involves a method that cancels as much as it complements the methods of the other two sections. In Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" the displacement of place and community is underscored by the displacement of its own recording.[4]

While expanding Burke's observations, my paper focuses on varieties of displacement in both the plot and the narration. I suggest that displacement is a necessary and uncanny condition that must be faced in post-World War Two

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Varieties of Displacement in Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person", *Litteraria Copernicana*, Vol. 51, No. 1–2, 2025, 159–164.

[2] Flannery O'Connor: The Displaced Person, in R. Giroux (ed.): *The Complete Stories*, New York. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, The Noonday Press, 1996, 194–236.

[3] David Griffith: The Displaced Person. Reading Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Islamophobia, *The Paris Review*, 10th December 2015.

[4] William Burke: Displaced Communities and Literary Form in Flannery O'Connor's "The Displaced Person", *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 1986, 219–227, https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.0943

society (just like in the 21st century), and it is only through a universal sense of humor, like Flannery O'Connor's that this discomfort might be somewhat relieved.

My essay focuses on varieties of displacement both in the plot and in the narration. The person mentioned in the title is Mr. Guizack, who comes as a refugee from Poland, together with his wife, son and daughter, to work at a run-down Southern estate (presumably in Georgia).[5] He is introduced to the owner, Mrs. McIntyre by an old Catholic priest, Father Flynn (who, in the mainly Protestant South is somewhat of an outsider, has a foreign accent and a curious admiration of the peacocks[6] on the farm). The presence of the Guizack family becomes increasingly irritating first and foremost to the white tenants working at the farm, Mr. and Mrs. Shortley, then to the African American farm hands, the old man Astor and the young man Sulk, finally to Mrs. McIntyre herself. In the course of the story, by and by, all of these characters become displaced and alienated.

The text labels Mr. Guizack as a D.P. – understandably, since he is sent to America from a DP camp in Europe after the Second World War. It is more puzzling that the mode of narration also seems to displace Mr. Guizack by never showing his point of view, so the reader can only guess what he and his family might think of their situation. He wears gold-rimmed glasses that (beside giving him an intellectual look) also alienate him from the others. (The glasses remind Mr. Shortley of the German soldier in World War One that threw a hand grenade at him and they might remind the reader of the criminal Misfit in O'Connor's other, most famous story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find".) In spite of his incessant and effective work on the farm, being able to handle all the machines, Mr. Guizack, too, is somewhat machine-like: there is nothing *organic* about him. At the very end of the story, when he becomes a victim of an accident (or a tacit agreement of letting him get killed), it is an uncontrolled machine that takes his life: this is the only time when one of his very vital *organs* is mentioned: the tractor wheel breaks his backbone. It is his inability to perceive and accept the tacit laws of the region that irritate others the most – and these tacit laws would undermine and override the most basic concepts of democracy and of Christianity (e.g. African American farm hands can steal turkeys on the farm without a problem, but interracial marriage is absolutely unthinkable). How could he have ever been prepared for things like that when coming to the land of the free and the brave? There is no knowing what he can

[5] For the historical sociocultural context see Susanna Stacy Johnson: *Flannery O'Connor, DPs, and "The Displaced person": Moral Integrity, History, and Fiction*, Częstochowa, Jan Długosz University, 2018.

[6] It aligns with the symbolism of immortality attached to peacocks, standing also for resurrection and spiritual life, within the Christian context.

and cannot see behind the gold-rimmed glasses. As Mrs. Shortley remarks: "It's them little eyes of his that is foreign."[7]

The first part of the story focuses on his first enemy on the farm: Mrs. Shortley. Her presentation as a giantess, "with the grand self-confidence of a mountain"[8] implies that she feels like belonging here by nature, observing the events with arms folded from a hilltop. However, her "icy blue", "surveying" eyes do not seem to notice the sun ("which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder"[9]). As Richard Giannone observes, "one senses foreboding in her apathy to nature's loveliness."[10] I would also add that the narration introduces the celestial body of the sun as an intruder in itself, exactly at the moment when the Polish family's intrusion into the world of the Southern farm occurs. Mrs. Shortley's looks "first grazed the tops of the displaced people's heads and then revolved downwards slowly, the way a buzzard glides and drops in the air until it alights on the carcass". What shocks her is the fact that the DPs look exactly like other people. "The woman had on a dress she might have worn herself and the children were dressed like anybody from around."[11] She had imagined them as visibly different, and instead of relief, their similitude to Americans raises suspicion and fear in her heart. Her fears are signs of her short-sightedness: she had seen a newsreel after the war in which piles of dead bodies were shown in great disorder ("a head thrust in here, a head there, a foot, a knee, a part that should have been covered up sticking out, a hand raised clutching nothing"[12]) and she has an intuition: "[the Guizacks], like rats with typhoid fleas, could have carried all those murderous ways over the water with them directly to this place. If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to say they were not the kind that would also do it to others?"[13] This logic of criminalizing the victim leads to effective xenophobia, and Mrs. Shortley prophetically sees the ruin of the Southern microcosm in the arrival of the strangers. She feels that with the appearance of the efficient Pole, the African American farm hands are in direct danger. She explains the term "Displaced Person" to Astor and Sulk in the following way:

> "They come from over the water," Mrs. Shortley said with a wave of her arm. "They are what is called Displaced Persons."
> "Displaced Persons," he said. "Well now. I declare. What do that mean?"

[7] O'Connor: *The Displaced Person*, 206.
[8] Ibid., 194.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, 1999, 103.
[11] O'Connor: *The Displaced Person*, 195.
[12] Ibid., 196.
[13] Ibid.

> "It means they ain't where they were born at and there's nowhere for them to go – like if you was run out of here and wouldn't nobody have you."
> "It seem like they here, though," the old man said in a reflective voice. "If they here, they somewhere."
> "Sho is," the other agreed. "They here."[14]

When the two farm hands don't seem to understand her point, she explains it more directly:

> "Before it was a tractor," she said, "it could be a mule. And before it was a Displaced Person, it could be a n*****. The time is going to come," she prophesied, "when it won't be no more occasion to speak of a n*****."[15]

However, it soon turns out that Mrs. McIntyre, satisfied with the work of Mr. Guizack and wanting to raise his salary, is considering the dismissal of the Shortleys, not the African Americans. Mrs. Shortley, who had thought herself to be safe on the farm (since Mrs. McIntyre had shared her thoughts with her about the former tenants, many of whom she had seen as "trash"), is now shocked, and decides to leave the place immediately, packing up all their belongings. When the car starts with the Shortley family, she has a sudden stroke – in her fit, she displays a disorder of body parts reminiscent of the newsreel: "She suddenly grabbed Mr. Shortley's elbow and Sarah Mae's foot at the same time and began to tug and pull on them as if she were trying to fit the two extra limbs onto herself."[16] In the narrator's words: she had been "displaced in the world from all that belonged to her."[17] Her death is very poetically described: "her eyes like blue painted glass seemed to contemplate for the first time the tremendous frontiers of her true country."[18] I intend to return to the phrase "true country" later, since it indicates that the feeling of belonging might only make sense in another dimension.

The second part of the story focuses on Mrs. McIntyre's past hardships and on her view of Mr. Guizack. In the first part, she had already said to Mrs. Shortley: "that man is my salvation," to which the tenant woman had answered: "I would suspicion salvation got from the devil."[19] Beside the possible theological implications, these words have a very practical meaning in the context: Mrs. Shortley is jealous and sees the source of all evil in the Polish man, and it becomes clear that Mrs. McIntyre had gone through difficult times after the

[14] Ibid., 199.
[15] Ibid., 206.
[16] Ibid., 213.
[17] Ibid., 214.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 203.

death of the Judge (her first husband, an old man who left her nothing but the house and the farm). Although she had two other unsuccessful marriages, she still respected the Judge the most, recalling his proverbial sayings, like "the devil you know is better than the devil you don't". Except for Astor, she had to hire all farm hands herself, and many families (the ones she had referred to as "trash") had cheated on her and left her. No wonder she is satisfied with the hard-working Displaced Person. Although she still doesn't understand Mr. Guizack's thoughts and ways, she feels extremely relieved that due to his expertise, things are going much better at the farm. In spite of her growing admiration, "[t]he truth was that he was not very real to her yet. He was a kind of miracle that she had seen happen and that she talked about but that she still didn't believe."[20] Her attitude changes when she finds out that Mr. Guizack had made a deal with Sulk, the young African American worker, so that his sixteen-year-old niece, who had been living in DP camps for three years, could come to America and marry him. This idea is unthinkable for Mrs. McIntyre. Her upset reaction discloses both her racism and her strong ties to African Americans: "Mr. Guizack! You would bring this poor innocent child over here and try to marry her to a half-witted thieving black stinking n*****! What kind of a monster are you?"[21] And, a little later: "I will not have my n*****s upset. I cannot run this place without my n*****s. I can run it without you but not without them and if you mention this girl to Sulk again, you won't have a job with me. Do you understand?" To put an emphasis to her change of mind, at the end of Part Two of the text, Mrs. McIntyre climbs to the top of the slope, stands "with her arms folded", taking a look over the field. "She narrowed her gaze until it closed entirely around the diminishing figure on the tractor as if she were watching him through a gunsight."[22] The scene recalls Mrs. Shortley's position and indicates that Mrs. McIntyre has taken sides against the Displaced Person, that is, she belongs to the Southern community.

The third part of the story presents Mrs. McIntyre's dilemma of firing Mr. Guizack. In her conversations with Father Flynn, she is more and more irritated by the pious and senile priest's arguments, to the point of the following utterance: "As far as I am concerned," she said and glared at him fiercely, "Christ was just another D.P."[23] With this, she probably means to show the priest that she does not care about the doctrines of the church (in Part One of the text, she had ridiculed Father Flynn's infantile admiration of the peacock behind his back.) The parallel between Christ and the DP is still striking, especially when one takes Flannery O'Connor's deep Catholic faith into consideration. As soon as Mr. Shortley returns to the farm, Mrs. McIntyre feels as if she had

[20] Ibid., 219.
[21] Ibid., 222.
[22] Ibid., 224.
[23] Ibid., 229.

been travelling and finally got home. It becomes evident that for her, the first person plural, the concept of the "us" includes Mr. Shortley and the African Americans and excludes the Guizacks and the priest. She promises Mr. Shortley that she would get rid of the Pole as soon as possible – but she finds herself repeatedly weak to do so. After several attempts, she finally makes up her mind, but just before she could walk up to Mr. Guizack, the accident (according to Richard Giannone's interpretation, the "murder") happens: the Pole is lying under a small tractor to fix it, Mr. Shortley steps out of the big tractor on the top of a slope to close a gate, the brake loosens and the uncontrolled machine rolls down, destroying the Pole and putting an end to Mrs. McIntyre's dilemma. While this is happening, there is a look between her, Mr. Shortley and Sulk that suggests words like murder and conspiracy: "She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever."[24] Perhaps it is not so much the tragedy itself as this look that displaces them from their own environment. When the priest gives the dying man the eucharist, the last communion, Mrs. McIntyre feels as if "she was in some foreign country where the people bent over the body were natives, and she watched like a stranger while the dead man was carried away in the ambulance."[25]

Soon after this, Mr. Shortley leaves the place without a notice, Sulk also goes away to the Southern part of the state. Astor cannot work alone, so he retires and Mrs. McIntyre hardly notices the emptying out of the farm, since she has a nervous affliction and has to be hospitalized. She comes out of the hospital with numb legs and hands and an impaired vision, stays in the house with a colored woman to help her and it is only Father Flynn who visits her weekly to talk about the doctrines of the church.

With all characters completely displaced, except Father Flynn, who had already been somewhat of a stranger from the beginning, it is important to consider the anagogical level of the story as well – the level that refers to the metaphysical dimensions. Flannery O'Connor had suggested that there is a "moment of grace" in her stories, often revealed through violence, a moment of divine intrusion into the texture of our three-dimensional world. In this text, this moment is very hard to find. The ending suggests destruction, displacement and decay. However, the text is carefully interwoven with symbols and signs of another value system: the peacock, lifting his many-colored tail, reminds Father Flynn of the transfiguration, he in fact says once: "Christ will come like that!"[26] "Christ in the conversation embarrassed [Mrs. McIntyre] the way sex had her mother,"[27] comments the narrator sarcastically, indicating

[24] Ibid., 234.
[25] Ibid., 235.
[26] Ibid., 226.
[27] Ibid.

Mrs. McIntyre's complete lack of appreciation for the metaphysical. She continues to talk about Mr. Guizack, and the priest about Christ, this is how the following awkward dialogue can occur:

> "He didn't have to come in the first place," she repeated, emphasizing each word. The old man smiled absently. "He came to redeem us," he said and blandly reached for her hand and shook it and said he must go.[28]

This dialogue has a comic effect and a very serious message as well. O'Connor is a master of blending the two. She draws a caricature of the infantile priest and has her reader see him as completely inadequate, still it is only he who might usher Mrs. McIntyre to her "true country". The story seems to suggest that equal respect for others is impossible in the three dimensions, communities are formed on the basis of excluding the outsiders, the very notion of "us" can only work against the "them". It is "us" that laugh behind the backs of the "them" we despise, look down on and ridicule. Humor itself develops along these lines. The priest and Mr. Guizack have no sense of humor in this story precisely because we never get the view of their first person plural. However, a broader and multidimensional humor is needed on the author's part when she presents her own metaphysical value system through the caricature – displacing herself from her writing. Displacement, thus, seems to be both an uncanny and a necessary condition, which can only be relieved by a universal sense of humor. May we conclude that it is a condition of feeling at *home* in the broadest sense?

[28] Ibid.

IDOLATRY IN ALL-DEMANDING EYES

A Reading of Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back"[1]

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 – whose 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.[2]

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Idolatry in All-Demanding Eyes: A Reading of Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back", *Orpheus Noster*, Vol. 15, No. 4, 2023, 5–17.

[2] Patrick Galloway: *The Dark Side of the Cross: Flannery O'Connor's Short Fiction*, Pat's Lit Page, 1996, n.p., https://www.cyberpat.com/essays/flan.html (accessed 17 March 2026).

"Parker's Back"[3] 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."[4]

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 being a writer who is at the same time a believer. Since 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

[3] Flannery O'Connor: Parker's Back, in R. Giroux (ed.): *The Complete Stories*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, The Noonday Press, 1996, 510–530.

[4] Stephen Sparrow: The Ultimate Heresy. The Heartless God in "Parker's Back", *Orthodox Christianity Then and Now*, Blog post, 2012, n.p., https://www.johnsanidopoulos.com/2012/03/ultimate-heresy-heartless-god-in.html (accessed 17 March 2026).

it, when in fact, faith prompts us to begin it, and to continue it until, like Jacob, we are marked.[5]

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"[6] 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"[7] and the skin on his homely wife's face is "thin and drawn tight as the skin on an onion."[8] 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), they have not much more in common.

Sarah Ruth is the daughter of a "Straight Gospel preacher"[9] and her ethical norms are based on a literal, fundamentalist reading of the Bible: she is "sniffing up sin"[10] 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[11]). 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 search 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

[5] Flannery O'Connor: Catholic Novelists, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 179–180.
[6] Cf. Søren Kierkegaard: Fear and Trembling, trans. Walter Lowrie, in R. Bretall (ed.): *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, New York, The Modern Library, Random House, 1943, 116–134.
[7] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 513.
[8] Ibid., 510.
[9] Ibid., 517.
[10] Ibid., 510.
[11] Richard Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 1989, 221.

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 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!"[12] As a response to his mouthful of oaths, "a terrible bristly claw"[13] 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,"[14] 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.

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"[15] 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

[12] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 511.
[13] Ibid., 511.
[14] Ibid., 510.
[15] Ibid., 515.

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,"[16] 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 to make Sarah Ruth jealous by describing the old lady he works for as a "hefty blonde,"[17] who calls him a "walking panner-rammer."[18]

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,"[19] 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!"[20] Many critics (Richard Giannone and Jordan Coher, for example) have pointed out the Biblical allusion to Moses's 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,"[21] selects the image of "a flat, stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes"[22] 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."[23] 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"[24] eyes of Sarah Ruth. When he is asked by the artist next day whether he is "saved,"[25] 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"[26] – but he barely dares to look at his back in the two mirrors. When

[16] Ibid., 519.
[17] Ibid., 511.
[18] Ibid., 519.
[19] Ibid., 519.
[20] Ibid., 520.
[21] Ibid., 521.
[22] Ibid., 522.
[23] Ibid., 523.
[24] Ibid., 510, 524.
[25] Ibid., 524.
[26] Ibid., 525.

he sees the image, he "turn[s] white and move[s] away."[27] 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."[28] 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 say she don't like the looks of God."[29]) On the way home he realizes that "all along that was what he wanted, to please her."[30] 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."[31] Upon arrival, he finds the front door barred, and Sarah Ruth asks four times "Who's there?" 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," 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."[32]

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!" she starts screaming "Idolatry!",[33] 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."[34]

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"[35] 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,[36] 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

[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid., 526.
[29] Ibid., 525.
[30] Ibid., 527.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Ibid., 528.
[33] Ibid., 529.
[34] Ibid., 530.
[35] Ibid., 518.
[36] John Macquarrie: *Principles of Christian Theology*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977, 145.

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 icepick eyes of Sarah Ruth as well as the eyes of his employer, the watchful old lady; finally the "superior"[37] eyes of the tattoo artist 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."[38] 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."[39] When the old lady tells him how to drive the tractor around the tree, she explains things *"as if he didn't have eyes,"*[40] 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*."[41] His *eyes* were *cavernous*[42] right after the accident. The artist doesn't recognize Parker in the "*hollow-eyed* creature"[43] before him, and Parker's "*eyes blared*, as if he were ready for a fight"[44] 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,"[45] 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."[46] 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

[37] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 521.
[38] Ibid., 514. (My emphasis.)
[39] Ibid., 513. (My emphasis.)
[40] Ibid., 520. (My emphasis.)
[41] Ibid. (My emphasis.)
[42] Ibid. (My emphasis.)
[43] Ibid., 521. (My emphasis.)
[44] Ibid., 523. (My emphasis.)
[45] Ibid., 522.
[46] Ibid.

as transparent as the wing of a fly."[47] 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."[48] 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."[49]

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:

> 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".[50]

I think such a strange sensation can be described when Parker feels "as if he were himself but a stranger to himself."[51] 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.[52]

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:

[47] Ibid., 524.
[48] Ibid., 526.
[49] Ibid., 527.
[50] Sartre: *The Look*, 351–352.
[51] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 527.
[52] Sartre: *The Look*, 353.

> 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, sculptures 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.[53]

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: *Obadiah* means "God's servant" in Hebrew, and *Elihue*: "my God is He". God's name is used and abused several times in the text, in the formerly quoted casual expression "God knew,"[54] 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?"[55] When at the time of the accident he hears himself "yelling in an unbelievably loud voice, 'GOD ABOVE!'," [56] 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,"[57] 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!"[58] and that "He don't *look*. He's a spirit. No man shall see his face,"[59] 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

[53] Ibid., 364.
[54] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 510.
[55] Ibid., 516.
[56] Ibid., 520.
[57] Ibid., 522.
[58] Ibid., 529.
[59] Ibid.

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"[60] recognizing for the first time in his soul "a perfect arabesque of colors"?[61] 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"?[62] Seemingly in this moment of absolute despair and failure, Flannery O'Connor abandons her hero without compassion. But in *Mystery and Manners*, in the essay entitled "Some Aspects of 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.[63]

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"[64]). 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?

[60] Ibid., 528.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 530.
[63] Flannery O'Connor: Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 43.
[64] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 528.

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 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.[65]

> And saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau; and the kingdom shall be the Lord's.[66]

[65] Obad. 1:12.
[66] Obad. 1:21.

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.[67]

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.

[67] Job. 33:25–26.

"JUDGEMENT DAY, LIMITED"

Transgression of Regional and Racial Boundaries in Flannery O'Connor's "Judgement Day"[1]

"Judgement Day"[2] is Flannery O'Connor's last story. The title itself refers to finality, not only on the level of the protagonist, T. C. Tanner, the old Southerner in New York City, whose last hour is described but also on the extratextual level, since the author was well aware of the proximity of her own death when writing it. This way, the text inevitably becomes a kind of "memento mori", a suggestion for sensitive readers to follow character and writer in facing mortality, the humanly shared necessity of transgressing the strongest existential boundary. My essay wishes to focus on instances of transgressing regional and racial boundaries as well – this way, "space" and "race" become central issues to be examined. I will also try to highlight "gaze" in the form of examining three interracial glances described in the text. In terms of gender, the text, written by a female author with a male protagonist as focalizer, who has a rather condescending view of his daughter, the only female character, might show Flannery O'Connor's special ability of ironical representation, rather questioning than directly passing *judgement* about gender-relations.

In the story, the title phrase comes up in a morbidly humorous context: that of an imagined practical joke. Tanner, who lives confined to his daughter's apartment in New York, has dreams of arriving back home in the South, if not alive, then in his coffin. Then he would pound on the lid just to pop out like a Jack-in-the-box and shout to his astonished black friend Coleman and white friend Hooten: "Judgement Day! Judgement Day! Don't you two fools know that it's Judgement Day?" Tanner's portrayal is on the verge of becoming a caricature and the imagined joke sounds like a travesty of the idea both of mortality and of resurrection. Such a transgression of stereotypical religious conventions is not at all alien from Flannery O'Connor, herself a devoted Catholic writer, who emphasizes the necessity of the shock, the surprise, the unexpected both in fiction, in real life and in religion, and describes the operation of grace as an "intrusion."[3] As Miles Orwell observes, "It is an irony that is the privilege

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: "Judgement Day, Limited": Transgression of Regional and Racial Boundaries in Flannery O'Connor's "Judgement Day", in Á.Zs. Kovács – L. B Sári (eds.): *Space, Gender, and the Gaze in Literature and Art*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, 163–173.

[2] Flannery O'Connor: Judgement Day, in R. Giroux (ed.): *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971, 531–551.

[3] O'Connor: On Her Own Work, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 112.

of the Christian vision, an irony whose expression in her fiction was the imaginative fulfilment of her faith."[4] Thus the episode can be seen at the same time as hilariously funny and deadly serious: it calls attention to the relative nature of judgements that are passed and limits that are transgressed in the story. It is precisely the variety of these disturbing limits and judgements in the text, which question human attempts and attitudes of seeing the world in black and white that I wish to investigate.

The scope of the plot is already limited: in time, it encompasses something like an hour, in space, a few yards between the protagonist's chair in the daughter's apartment and the rails of the stairs closest to their landing. This space, however, might be called typically "hybrid", in the sense that it comprises both physical and virtual space, since the protagonist never leaves the South in his heart and regards New York to be a "no kind of place."[5]

The action can be summarized in a few sentences. While the daughter is about to go shopping, the sick and deranged old man is determined to leave the apartment and find his way home dead or alive. When she is gone, he staggers out to the landing, loses his balance and falls off the stairs, landing "upside down in the middle of the flight."[6] We hear part of a conversation between him and his neighbor, a black actor. Tanner's dead and humiliated body is found by the daughter, who first decides to have him buried in New Yok, but after sleepless nights, has the body exhumed and shipped to Corinth, Georgia, so that she might sleep well and he may rest in peace. Events from the distant and recent past are told through Tanner's thoughts and memories while preparing for the journey. From these, three encounters seem to be the most significant, since they also represent three different kinds of interracial "glances": 1. how he had originally persuaded his later friend, the black Coleman to work for him, 2. how he had moved to New York because he did not want to work for a colored landowner, and 3. how he tried to befriend his daughter's new neighbor, a black actor, who was so irritated by his assumptions that he knocked him through the open door back to his daughter's apartment.

All the three encounters display the transgressions of several kinds of limits: racial (between whites and blacks), regional (between North and South), and environmental (between the urban and the rural lifestyle). I will examine these before discussing another type of limit, i.e. generational (between father and daughter), together with the question to what extent all of these limits are blurred by the uncertainty of distinction between imagination and reality.

1. Tanner, in his prime, had been famous for being a white overseer for black agricultural workers. As he remembers, "He was known to have a way

[4] Miles Orwell: *Invisible Parade. The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1972, 187.
[5] O'Connor: *Judgement Day*, 531.
[6] Ibid., 548.

with n*****s. There was an art to handling them."[7] In a less politically incorrect context, this ability could be equivalent to a pedagogical talent. When first meeting Coleman, a lazy bear-like stranger demoralizing his six other workers by not doing anything, he went up to him, addressed him with the word "preacher" and, at the risk of getting attacked (since he was a rather monkey-like small white man), presented him with something he had accidentally whittled out of bark: a pair of eyeglasses. When Coleman put the makeshift glasses on, it was Tanner's vision that first changed: "he had an instant's sensation of seeing before him a negative image of himself, as if clownishness and captivity had been their common lot. The vision failed him before he could decipher it."[8] The reader, however, may decipher this revelation as a recognition of a peculiar human bond, transgressing the racial limits. Then Tanner asked what Coleman saw through the glasses. The conversation that follows might be interpreted as uncomfortable since it settles a subordinating situation, but it might also testify to a special type of mutual respect:

> "What you see through those glasses?"
> "See a man."
> "What kind of a man?"
> "See the man make theseyer glasses."
> "Is he white or black?"
> "He white!" the Negro said as if only at that moment was his vision sufficiently improved to detect it. "Yessuh, he white!" he said.
> "Well, you treat him like he was white," Tanner said. "What's your name?"
> "Name Coleman," the Negro said.
> And he had not got rid of Coleman since.[9]

This episode reveals Tanner's ability of observation and judgement, the reassurance of his assumptions and, since the eyeglasses become symbolic, it also shows how his way of seeing the world can be projected to Coleman. His way of seeing the world is limited and stereotypically determined by the Southern white attitude of his time – but there is a consensus between the dominating and the subordinated spirits, resulting in a lifelong friendship. For Tanner, this relationship will be closest to what he means by "home". Miles Orwell interprets it the following way:

> … this meeting between Tanner and Coleman is spontaneous, uncalculated, undemeaning, a surprising discovery of their consanguinity rather than a forced

[7] Ibid., 536.
[8] Ibid., 538–539.
[9] Ibid., 539.

> charade. What it implies is consistent with O'Connor's whole outlook – that the coming together of black and white, when it happens, is a gift and not a contrivance, and that it is based on a shared sense of human limitations or, if you will, poverty.[10]

It is exactly the shared sense of human limitations that is missing from the other two encounters.

2. The colored (half black, half Indian and white) landowner, Doctor Foley has the upper hand when he offers the job for Tanner. In this encounter, both participants seem to lack the eyeglasses for mutual understanding, in fact, they do not even look into each other's eyes, Tanner's *gaze* is directed into the landscape.

> "The day coming," the doctor said, "when the white folks IS going to be working for the colored and you mights well to git ahead of the crowd."
> "That day ain't coming for me," Tanner said shortly.
> "Done come for you," the doctor said. "Ain't come for the rest of them."
> Tanner's gaze drove on past the farthest blue edge of the tree line into the pale, empty afternoon sky. "I got a daughter in the North," he said. "I don't have to work for you."[11]

In this conversation, Tanner sounds determined, but he later regards his decision as a failure of his sound judgement. He never wanted to leave the South, it was his pride and racial prejudice that dictated the answer to Doctor Foley. As he thinks it over in the daughter's apartment, "If he had known it was a question of this – sitting here looking out of this window all day in this no-place, or just running a still for a n*****, he would have run the still for the n*****. He would have been a n*****'s white n***** any day."[12]

It seems that the reversal of the order of racial subordination would have been much less shocking for Tanner than the move from South to North, from the rural to the urban environment. In the metropolis, he finds the air "fit for cats and garbage", and, most of all, he suffers from the impossibility of communication because of the lack of a community. This regional attitude can also be detected in, and brought into parallel with Flannery O'Connor's essay "The Regional Writer":

> Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community. One of the reasons Southern fiction thrives is that our best writers are able to do this. They are not

[10] Orwell: *Invisible Parade*, 183.
[11] O'Connor: Judgement Day, 540.
[12] Ibid.

> alienated, they are not lonely, suffering resists gasping for purer air. The Southern writer apparently feels the need of expatriation less than other writers in this country. Moreover, when he does leave and stay gone, he does so at great peril to that balance between principle and fact, between judgment and observation, which is so necessary to maintain if fiction is to be true. The isolated imagination is easily corrupted by theory, but the writer inside his community seldom has such a problem.
>
> To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality. It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking.[13]

O'Connor seems to suggest a special sense of belonging, which is missing from the North, and she emphasizes the necessity of acknowledging one's limitations, since accepting them is necessary for self-identification. The regional type of transgression might be dangerous because the very preconditions of communication might change, therefore one can lose even the possibility of finding a community. When Tanner moves to New York, he becomes unable to function in any meaningful way – he is irritated by his daughter and knows he is a burden for her, but he cannot communicate this to anyone. With Foley, they at least spoke the same language, understood each other's gestures – but here in the urban environment everyone seems isolated.

3. The only hope for him up here is the new neighbor, a "n*****", whom Tanner assumes to have come from South Alabama and he is eager to start a conversation. His interest is "professional", so to say, since besides longing for the Southern dialect and familiarity, his "pedagogical talent" might also be practiced. He puts it to a test, in spite of his daughter's warning. The daughter says, "You keep away from them. Don't you go over there trying to get friendly with him. They ain't the same around here and I don't want any trouble with n*****s, you hear me? If you have to live next to them, just you mind your business and they'll mind theirs."[14] This philosophy brings into mind Robert Frost's poem, "Mending Wall": "Good fences make good neighbors." Tanner cannot obey his daughter's orders because he desperately wants to participate in what is going on around him, and this time, his judgement is completely mistaken. All glances between the participants of this encounter are misinterpreted by both of them. The black neighbor says he has never been to Alabama, and upon being addressed as "Preacher" (which is equal to a compliment in the South), he indignantly declares that he is an actor. Perhaps the problem is that he already

[13] Flannery O'Connor: The Regional Writer, in O'Connor: *Mystery and Manners*, 1969, 53–54.
[14] O'Connor: *Judgement Day*, 543.

has his "horn-rimmed spectacles,"[15] his own fixed way of seeing the world – no shared vision can be projected into him, and he takes Tanner's advance as a direct offense. When Tanner insists on a conversation, suggesting "It's a little actor in most preachers, ain't it?,"[16] he violently bursts out: "I don't take no crap," he whispered, "off no wool-hat red-neck son-of-a-bitch peckerwood old bastard like you." And in a "high, piercing and weak voice", he adds, "And I'm not no preacher! I'm not even no Christian! I don't believe that crap. There ain't no Jesus and there ain't no God."[17] Tanner, whose fear of God had kept him all his life from direct physical violence, adds a vitriolic remark to conclude the neighbor's line of thought: "And you ain't black," he said. "And I ain't white."[18] This releases the neighbor's brutality. Humiliating Tanner by pulling his hat down over his eyes, he beats him and sends him reeling back to the floor of the daughter's living room. Tanner probably suffers a slight stroke and upon recovering, as soon as he can, he makes his absurd plan for his journey home. As Richard Giannone recalls, one of the working titles of an earlier version of the story had been "Getting home,"[19] and indeed, getting home may refer to Tanner's wish to find his eternal dwelling place in the land of the Lord, as István Szokonya suggests.[20] He mutters a psalm ("The Lord is my shepherd") before starting out, manages to take a few steps, and, already before reaching the front door, he is "as confident as if the woods of home lay at the bottom of the stairs". But at the top of the landing, "all at once his legs disappeared, or felt as if they had."[21] He falls, and upon waking from his swoon, he thinks his dream had come true and indeed, his body is being carried to Coleman in the coffin. He can even hear Coleman's and Hooten's excited voices:

> "That him," Coleman said, "one of his tricks."
> "It's a damn rat in there," Hooten said.
> "It's him. Git the crowbar."[22]

In a weak voice, Tanner still manages to utter the punchline of his practical joke: "Judgement Day! Judgement Day! You idiots didn't know it was Judgement Day, did you?" But upon recognizing the neighbor's "large surly mouth and sullen eyes", upon hearing the mocking voice ("Ain't any coal man, either." "Ain't no Judgement Day, old man. Cept this. Maybe this here Judgement Day for you."),

[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid., 545.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, 1999, 240.
[20] István Szokonya: Tanner Returned – Cities of Flannery O'Connor's "Judgement Day", *Topos. Journal of Space and Humanities*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2013, 111.
[21] O'Connor: *Judgement Day*, 548.
[22] Ibid., 549.

Tanner "lifted his hand, as light as a breath, and said in his jauntiest voice, 'Hep me up, Preacher. I'm on my way home!'" Flannery O'Connor tactfully decided not to go into details concerning the violent response. We see what the daughter sees upon coming back from the store. "His hat had been pulled down over his face and his head and arms thrust between the spokes of the banister; his feet dangled over the stairwell like those of a man in the stocks."[23] By humiliating him this way, the black actor accidentally and unintentionally had played the role of a Preacher and done what he had been asked for: he helped Tanner go *home*, since without the atrocity he might still have recovered to suffer longer.

The hat, repeatedly pulled over his face by the black neighbor, had been a symbol of Tanner's dignity. At an early point in the story, the daughter brings it up in a conversation with her husband as an example of being "somebody": "Well you don't even have you a hat," she said. "Nothing but that leather cap with flaps. People that are somebody wear hats. Other kinds wear those leather caps like you got on." She defends her father: "He was somebody when he was somebody. He never worked for nobody in his life but himself and had people – other people – working for him."[24] The husband with a "stupid muscular face" and a "high yankee voice" discloses his own racist attitude when he says, "Yah? n*****s is what he had working for him. […] That's all. I've worked a n***** or two myself." But the daughter can't let it at that: "Those were just nawthun n*****s you worked", she said, […] "It takes brains to work a real n*****. You got to know how to handle them."[25] Her attitude clearly makes a distinction on the basis of her upbringing, between "somebodies" and "others", between *quality* and *trash*. And in her judgement, "real n*****s" are closer to the first category, while the world of the North altogether is closer to the second. Tanner, overhearing the conversation, feels a sudden warmth for the daughter, to be chilled soon by hearing she might break her promise and bury him in New York. He does not think much of his childless daughter with "gray hair that hung to her shoulders and a round face, beginning to wear."[26] He mercilessly criticizes her habits, e.g. after she warns him not to bother the neighbors, he notices: "She began to wrinkle her nose like a rabbit, a stupid way she had."[27] She is not fit for conversation, either, since she prefers to talk to herself in two distinct voices while doing the washing up. Taking care of her father is a duty she can boast to herself with, without paying much attention to the old man's real needs. The generational limit is rather reversed than transgressed, since he is now in her custody, revolting against the situation in a childish way.

[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid., 532.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid., 533.
[27] Ibid., 543.

The eyeglasses, the hat and the peculiar or stereotypical habits disclose that each of the portrayed characters live and make their judgements mostly in their own strongly limited imagination, regardless of the others. All of them are deprived of any objective viewpoint, and the possibility of sharing a view with others or imposing a view on others is denied of most of them. The only thing that might make some of them rise above this sorry situation is the acceptance of the limits and their willingness to leave the judgement to God. As Richard Giannone puts it:

> O'Connor prepares her characters for elevation to a richer life by bringing them to the bedrock of experience: the awareness of limitation. This state of want is a sign that the last days have begun. Such poverty has nothing to do with economics. It has rather to do with mystery, and it is the central mystery of our position on earth as debtors to God in relation to one another. The poor in spirit can recognize their dependence on God and be amazed by the gracious result of their reliance. With midwinter in his heart and shadows closing around him, Tanner gives thanks.
>
> O'Connor not only brings all her heroines and heroes to an astonishment born of utter want, she also writes from a similar position. "I work from such a basis of poverty that everything I do is a miracle to me" (Letters 127.), she says to a friend.[28]

And what community of poverty might be shared by characters, author and readers alike? On the basis of the name of the small town in Georgia, Corinth, Flannery O'Connor might as well suggest that the Biblical message is addressed to all of us, Corinthians. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we can read: "Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."[29] And, in a later chapter: "But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged."[30] Perhaps O'Connor also read through these biblical verses in preparation for the strongest transgression that may come to humans any time in the form of an almighty practical joke of a Judgement Day.

In conclusion: the limitations and transgressions of regional and racial boundaries seem to be subordinated to the characters' limits of imagination in this story. Observing three specific encounters, I tried to show the limits of understanding and judgement. I also tried to call attention to the author's wisdom in the proximity of death, leaving the question of limits open and suggesting that from a three-dimensional, earthly gaze, the vision of Judgement Day might always remain *limited*.

[28] Giannone: *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, 1999, 247.
[29] 1Cor. 4:5. (King James Version)
[30] 1Cor. 11:31. (King James Version)

"SONGS THAT VOICES NEVER SHARE"

Mr. Singer's Gestures in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*[1]

When the world falls mute around us, are we more likely to perceive a sudden absence or a sudden presence? Is the absence of sound the same as the presence of silence? How, through what devices can the sounds of silence become audible – is it, and in what sense is it possible to talk about songs that voices never share, and what hearing aids can we think of in order to perceive them? Could they be called "the hearing aids of the heart"? McCuller's novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* focuses on alienation; human loneliness features as its central topic. It seems to present a gesture, or rather, a series of gestures of reaching out for understanding – and it is precisely this type of gesture that will be examined.

First the novel and its author will be introduced and then I wish to concentrate on what might be meant by the word "gesture" and how it might be related to "myth." The investigation of certain gestures from the text, examples of conscious or unconscious movements of the characters toward one another, as well as examples of silence, of temporary or permanent muteness will follow. The final claim is that the novel itself performs a similar gesture. In the closing passages of the essay the reader's possible responses will be examined – shall we call them "inner songs?" or "gestures?" – in the silent wake of the reading experience.

Carson McCullers, who has often been compared to William Faulkner, was twenty years old when she started writing the novel with the working title: "The Mute". Three years later, in 1940, the finished work came out under the title *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*,[2] and it immediately made the author famous. It is by no means juvenile in any other sense of the word than that it testifies to an understanding, characteristic of the tender sensitivity of either the very young or the very old. The main themes are presented by the author in her sketch "The Author's Outline," under five points:

> The broad principal theme of this book is indicated in the first dozen pages. This is the theme of man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as is possible. Surrounding this general idea there are several

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: "Songs that Voices Never Share": Mr. Singer's Gestures in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, in M. Pellérdi – G. Reuss (eds.): *Reverberations of Silence. Silenced Texts, Sub-Texts and Authors in Literature, Language and Translation*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013, 131–147.

[2] The title came from a poem by William Sharp, "The Lonely Hunter" (quoted in Josyane Savigneau: *Carson McCullers. A Life*, trans. Joan E. Howard, Boston – New York, Houghton Mifflin, 2001, 62.)

> counter themes and some of these may be stated briefly as follows: (1) There is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God. A personal God created by a man is a reflection of himself and in substance this God is most often inferior to his creator. (2) In a disorganized society these individual Gods or principles are likely to be chimerical and fantastic. (3) Each man must express himself in his own way – but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, shortsighted society. (4) Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature. (5) Some men are heroes by nature in that they will give all that is in them without regard to the effort or to the personal returns.[3]

She adds: "Of course, these themes are never stated nakedly in the book." Then she summarizes the main plot, too:

> The general outline of this work can be expressed very simply. It is the story of five isolated, lonely people in their search for expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves. One of these five persons is a deaf mute, John Singer – and it is around him that the whole book pivots.[4]

John Singer is unable to sing – except maybe "songs that voices never share." Since in the greatest part of the novel he is more of a passive, attentive than an active, expressive character, becoming a "personal God-figure" for many others, my analysis of his gestures starts by concentrating on his, so to say, "inner song" – his way of turning towards another magically idealized person, his example of drawing energy from the power of love. The first sentence of the novel is the following: "In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together."[5] From the start, the reader is informed about a close relationship between two persons but their being mute is practically the only characteristic that they have in common. As opposed to the thin, ascetic, intelligent and bright-eyed Singer, his friend, Spiros Antonapoulos, is a corpulent Greek with sleepy eyes, of whom no one can tell how much he understands of the world around him. He loves to eat and is a good cook, he likes and needs physical comfort. Apparently, he is also able to give comfort to Singer, for whom he represents something like wisdom, family or safety. Whether there is a homosexual relationship between them is not mentioned in the novel – this question is not of primary concern because McCullers first and foremost emphasizes the spirituality in their friendship. In the gestures between the two friends, deep affection and a sense of belonging are recognizable on Singer's part (in fact, his name is introduced in the book

[3] Quoted in Savigneau: *Carson McCullers. A Life*, 61.
[4] Savigneau: *Carson McCullers. A Life*, 61.
[5] McCuller: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, 3.

together with a specific gesture): "The thin mute, John Singer, nearly always put his hand on his friend's arm and looked for a second into his face before leaving him."[6] They both go to work every day: Singer is an engraver at a jeweler's and Antonapoulos works at a grocer's. After work, they go home together. Their "conversations" are depicted as follows:

> At home Singer was always talking to Antonapoulos. His hands shaped the words in a swift series of designs. His face was eager and his grey-green eyes sparkled brightly. With his thin, strong hands he told Antonapoulos all that had happened during the day.
>
> Antonapoulos sat back lazily and looked at Singer. It was seldom that he ever moved his hands to speak at all – and then it was to say that he wanted to eat or to sleep or to drink. These three things he always said with the same vague fumbling signs. At night, if he were not too drunk, he would kneel down before his bed and pray awhile. Then his plump hands shaped the words "Holy Jesus" or "God" or "Darling Mary". These were the only words Antonapoulos ever said. Singer never knew just how much his friend understood of all the things he told him. But it did not matter.[7]

What is it that really matters then? We could answer with a phrase used by a memorable young character, the tomboy, Frankie from one of the author's later works, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). At a certain point in that novel the adolescent Frankie realizes that her elder brother and his bride are "the *we* of me."[8] Mr. Singer could say the same about Antonapoulos. "The *we* of me," meaning comfort, family, familiarity combined with excitement, a sense of belonging: a complex and all-embracing feeling of love. In yet another later famous novella, to be examined in the next chapter of this volume, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951), Carson McCullers presents an equally painful and beautiful theory of love, excluding the possibility of reciprocity, since according to her theory, "[t]here are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which had lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing."[9] Antonapoulos soon develops kleptomania and shows antisocial behavior in many other ways: he urinates in public places, deliberately bumps into strangers, frightens the passengers in the street and makes awkward faces – so his Greek cousin, the greengrocer in whose fruit and candy store he had been employed decides not only to dismiss him but to send him to a lunatic asylum. At this point, it should seem obvious

[6] McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 3.
[7] Ibid., 4.
[8] McCullers: *The Member of the Wedding*, 35.
[9] McCullers: *A szomorú kávéház balladája*, 68.

that his friend is more of a problem and a burden than a partner of any kind for Singer – but he sees the matter in a different way. Later, when he visits Antonapoulos in the mental institution, he even envies the other patients in the ward for being constantly so close to him and would change places with them any minute. McCullers's theory mentioned above also explains that it is not necessary to wonder how come or why all that precious love is wasted on a person who, for most of the outsiders, seems like nothing but a fat moron:

> The beloved may be treacherous, greasy-headed, and given to evil habits. Yes, and the lover may see this as clearly as anyone else – but that does not affect the evolution of his love one whit. A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp. A good man may be the stimulus for a love both violent and debased, or a jabbering madman may bring about in the soul of someone a tender and simple idyll. Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself.[10]

This inevitably debatable theory may also be applied to the other characters of various age, race and gender, who turn toward Singer with a relatively similar adoration: Biff Brannon, the attentive owner of the New York Café, Jake Blount, the troubled anarchist stranger, Mick Kelly, the boyish thirteen-year-old young girl, who loves music, and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, the African American medical doctor, who believes in Marxist ideas and the "strong true purpose" of his race, his people. They all think of Mr. Singer as the only person in town capable of understanding their situation. So, after the departure of Antonapoulos, Singer becomes a more and more important character, an odd father-confessor or personal God-figure for those who alternately visit his room at the boarding house operated by Mick's mother, Mrs. Kelly, which is at the same time the home of the Kelly family.

Before focusing on Singer's gestures toward his admirers and the results of these in each individual case, it is important to study the meaning of the word "gesture". In *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, we find the following:

> **gesture** < ML *gestura*, mode of action, <*gestus*, pp. of *gerere*, "to bear, carry"
> 1. movement of the body or part of the body, to express or emphasize ideas, emotions, etc.
> 2. any action, statement or characteristic of utterance, intended to convey a state of mind, intention, etc.; demonstration of power, principles, etc., often one made only for effect: as, *his speech was a gesture of friendship*.[11]

[10] Ibid., 70.

[11] gesture, in Joseph H. Friend – David B. Guralnik (eds.): *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College edition, Cleveland – New York, The World Publishing Company, 1953.

It is the second definition that contains one of the most important aspects of the gesture for my literary analyses: through the intentionality, a *direction* is implied. The direction is as crucial in the case of a gesture in literature as in the case of a vector in physics. But unlike the magnitude of a vector, the magnitude of a gesture cannot be promptly measured because gestures tend to remain unfinished: there is a special silence, a blank space for a response around them. In a diagram, I would certainly use the same sign, the arrow for a gesture (this is the way vectors, too are signified, and an arrow – Cupid's – can traditionally indicate love as well, when it is drawn through a heart).[12] But the arrow in this case is more like the one in the philosophical examples of Zeno of Elea: it is standing in the air; it does not necessarily reach its destination. This gives the gesture a peculiar feeling of suspense.

Now I turn to the wording of this suspense by Roman Katsman, professor of literature at Bar Ilan University, Israel, who studies the notion of gestures connected to myth in literary analysis. In his article entitled "Anthropoetic Gesture: A Key to Milorad Pavić's *Poetics*," he points out the following:

> A gesture is an organizing principle or a structure validating the appearance of meaning where chaos rules. The gesture is a symbol of becoming, the incorporation and humanization of this becoming. Itself neither order nor chaos, the gesture eliminates their dichotomy and establishes a new (always new) form of being, and reflects the becoming of life. Hence its unpredictable, elusive character. Having come to a standstill, the gesture becomes a sign of death, an incorporation of time that does not flow but has stopped. Therefore, the mystery of life, a secret message about the true connection between things, flashes through its sharp agility.[13]

Earlier in the article he also explains:

> […] in a gesture, the distinction between spiritual and physical, ethical and aesthetic, is lifted because of their mutual re-codification. The aesthetic function of movements, figures and positions is projected unto the field of ethical meanings and vice versa: ethical acts are perceived as possessing aesthetic functions. Another gestural function of high importance is the ethical-aesthetic representation of time, that is, the incorporation of the movement of time in behavioral acts and in their spatial-temporal organization. Hence the great anthropological significance of a gesture and

[12] This is similar to the three-line arrow-shaped poem by Art Schuhart in which the conventional image is upset and therefore brought alive (A.L. Schuhart: *Song of Experience and Innocence*, Washington D.C., G.Y.S.T. Press, 1989, n.p.)

Love
It wounds
Arrows

[13] Katsman: *Anthropoetic Gesture*, 11.

> its profound connection with metaphor and myth; hence also the great importance of gesture for postmodernism, which returned the body to the field of literature.[14]

In another article, "The Miracle of Literature," Katsman offers the term "mythopoiesis" to reflect on a new mode of reading. Based on Aleksei Losev's definition of myth, "a miraculous personality history given in a word,"[15] he talks about mythopoiesis as "the art of myth-creation by means of the text-creation skill."[16] He makes a distinction between mythopoiesis and mythopoetics in modern criticism (e.g. in Northrop Frye's works) "based on the fact that the latter is concerned with the use of myths (structures, archetypes, versions and elaboration) for the sake of poetics. In contrast, the study of mythopoiesis is concerned with the use of poetics for the sake of myth-creation."[17] This is explained further in the following sentence: "Myth is created in mythopoiesis, but the myth *is not the object* of mythopoiesis."[18] According to Katsman, the art of myth-creation and text creation as an art is extended, from the work that is read, to the reading process itself. This *gesture* would both liberate the reader and oblige him or her with artistic responsibilities – an eternal, challenging topic for further considerations and refinements. Carson McCullers's works are especially suitable for the approach described above – for she is an expert in myth-making. Emily Miller Budick claims that she "discovers a language of the heart that […] transcends the limitations of symbolic, representational, ideological discourse."[19] She is not so much interested in the myth of history like Faulkner but excels in mythologizing the hopelessly dull, dreary, vacant scenery and suffocating atmosphere of the neglected and underdeveloped Southern small town. As Alfred Kazin points out in *The Bright Book of Life*:

> Carson McCullers was a greater myth-maker than she was a novelist. Her theme was the utter dislocation of love "in our time" and "in our town". […] The characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* live in another world so insistent as to suggest damnation. […] McCullers's myth-making power was to fit this obsessive loneliness, this sense of total weakness before real, earthly damnation, into the Southern climate, the town in summer, the doldrums of children with nowhere to go. […] The barrenness, vacancy, inertia seem to come out of the weather; the emotions of solitude flourish crazily in the parched streets; even McCullers's concentration on absolute clarity of style suggests the same still, depressed, vacant atmosphere,

[14] Ibid., 9.
[15] Quoted in Katsman: *The Miracle of Literature*, 211.
[16] Ibid., 219.
[17] Ibid., 220
[18] Ibid., 224.
[19] Budick: *Engendering Romance*, 143.

> produces distinctness as a tragic effect. […] The consistency of her theme absorbed the town into itself, made the immediate landscape hot with silent emotion.[20]

The gestures of the characters that we are about to examine are performed in such a landscape and the atmosphere described above is not without dangers. Kazin calls attention to "that pervasive cry for sympathy which fills up *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* like a gas, numbing us."[21] The silence of the "pivotal" Mr. Singer is in a way contagious–at least once, each of the other main characters falls completely silent. It would be tempting to quote Simon and Garfunkel here: "silence, like a cancer, grows"[22] – but the parallel is misleading: this silence is also the silence of sympathy, its growth not only threatens but also enriches the person to whom it happens.

Before their encounter with Mr. Singer, the characters have their own habitual gestures: Biff Brannon very frequently rubs his nose, Jake Blount covers his trembling and vulnerable lips with his hand, Mick Kelly keeps picking at the front of her blouse and she often reaches up to her forehead to smoothen back her bangs, and Doctor Copeland likes to crack the joints of his long fingers. Most of these (except his own) are observed by Biff Brannon in the restaurant. He recognizes that Singer's distinctive gesture would be hiding his hands in his pocket. (Of course, deprived of his companion, he imposes a second muteness on himself: he refrains from talking with his hands as well.) Nevertheless, he can communicate through other gestures. The easiest of them is writing: with his silver pencil, he writes notes, always thoughtfully worded and accurately spelled – he also writes letters to Antonapoulos that are never sent, but he enjoys the forming of the words, and puts the letters down as carefully and neatly as he is doing his job: engraving. These notes have a special effect – as if they were indeed engraved into the hearts of his listeners. Mick often feels that she and Mr. Singer share a secret – perhaps just because the medium of writing in everyday affairs gives a mysterious flavor to the ordinary words. When he first decides to dine at the New York Café, he hands Biff the following note:

Each morning for breakfast I want an egg, toast and coffee	– $0.15
Lunch I want a soup (any kind), a meat sandwich, and milk	– $0.25
Please bring me at dinner three vegetables (any kind but cabbage), fish or meat, and a glass of beer	– $0.35

Thank you.[23]

[20] Alfred Kazin: *The Bright Book of Life. American Storytellers from Hemingway to Mailer*, Boston–Toronto, Little, Brown and Company, 1973, 51–53.
[21] Ibid., 53.
[22] Paul Simon: The Sound of Silence, in Paul Simon: *Lyrics. 1964–2008*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2008, 5–6.
[23] McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 10.

The words "Please" and "Thank you," as well as the change in the syntactic structure make this a gesture more than just a list, and Biff is sensitive enough to take it as such. He has a special feeling for those who are handicapped in any way, wanting to treat them to free drinks and discounts. His sensitivity and his attitude, especially after the death of his wife, Alice, seem to be more feminine than masculine. He in fact believes that

> By nature, all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little moustaches. And he even proved it in himself – the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby were his kids.[24]

This realization makes Biff even more caring and attentive, he starts using his dead wife's perfume, and he wouldn't even hurt a fly. To quote another example of a gesture: right after the death of Alice, "[a] fat bee crawled across the top of the dresser, and adroitly Biff caught it in his hand and put it out the open window."[25] He dreams of sewing beautiful dresses for little girls and holding the whole world in an embrace. How come it is not this particular individual who connects the lonely souls of the town? He has all the facilities with his café – he could create an exceptional place for the community with the understanding warmth, safety and comfort they are so much longing for. However, most of his customers feel uncomfortable in his presence. Jake regards him to be one of those "who don't know"; Mick shrinks from his special attention, fearing that he would remember the time when she shoplifted a chewing gum. Dr. Copeland flees from his café as soon as he is brought in by Jake – and Biff's sister-in-law doesn't seem to follow his advice on any matter either, but especially concerning the bringing up of her four-year-old daughter, Baby. Perhaps his "embrace" is also possessive, it is like his glance with which he is able to measure up what happens in his "territory," an alert glance "like a lasso."[26] Mr. Singer seems to be the only one who understands him – and Biff is the only one who makes the connection between the thin mute walking beside the big fat Greek in the old days and the town's new spiritual helper (about whom rumors spread). The rich think he is rich, the poor think that he used to be very poor, the Jewish that he is Jewish and the Turks that he is of Turkish descent. Biff seems to need Singer not so much as to tell him his ideas than to ask him about questions most of which remain unanswered.

[24] Ibid., 103.
[25] Ibid., 96.
[26] Ibid., 182.

Jake Blount, the stranger in the town, is introduced with the following words, based on Biff's observations:

> The man was short, with heavy shoulders like beams. He had a small, ragged moustache, and beneath this his lower lip looked as though it had been stung by a wasp. There were many things about the fellow that seemed contrary. His head was very large and well-shaped, but his neck was soft and slender as a boy's. The moustache looked false, as if it had been stuck on for a costume party and would fall off if he talked too fast. It made him seem almost middle-aged, although his face with its high, smooth forehead and wide-open eyes was young. His hands were huge, stained, and calloused, and he was dressed in a cheap, white-linen suit. There was something very funny about the man, yet at the same time another feeling would not let you laugh.[27]

McCullers masterfully combines characteristics in her description that make the figure vulnerable: the mercilessly exposed weaknesses cry out for mercy on the part of the reader – at the same time, we are gently warned that Jake is by no means to be idealized. What she refers to as "another feeling" might be the dread of madness and disorder – later craziness is also discovered and described in his eyes. It seems like a proof of his unfamiliarity with the place that he is the one to single out the mute for conversation, without noticing that he is not getting any audible responses. When he is drunk, he seems to be looking for trouble – Singer's first gesture toward him is offering him shelter for the night. The next day he treats him with ice-water against his hangover and makes him breakfast. It is mainly the result of these gestures that Jake decides to stay in the town and he finds work, operating the swings in the Sunny Dixie Show. He keeps explaining his anarchist ideas about social reform to Singer, and although nobody else can understand him, his only friend lets him speak, drink and do as he likes. It is a great feeling of freedom that most of his "clients" get from Mr. Singer.

For Mick Kelly, this is primarily a freedom from embarrassment. She can recall a scene when Mr. Singer's electric fan caught her blouse and he helped her with such a gentle gesture that she did not feel embarrassed at all. Mick, a literary predecessor of Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, is an autobiographical figure. She is fascinated by music, marking the name "MOTSART" and dreaming of piano and music lessons so that she could remember all the notes better. She is, in a way, not only more realistic, but also more mythological as a character than any other, since she is constantly in the process of *becoming*: within the relatively short time of the novel, about a year, she is on her way to grow up. This is marked both by her artistic experiences and the

[27] Ibid., 13.

everyday events (in her terms: by what happens both in the "inside room" and in the "outside room"). After her first "prom" party that turns into a rampant hullabaloo, she wanders about and finds herself listening to someone's radio in the outskirts of the town at night. Beethoven's Third Symphony strikes her in a most profound and extraordinary way:

> Wonderful music like this was the worst hurt that there could be. The whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen. […] The music left only this bad hurt in her, and a blankness. She could not remember any of the symphony, not even the last few notes. She tried to remember but no sound at all came to her. Now that it was over there was only her heart like a rabbit and this terrible hurt.[28]

That very same night, she scrapes her leg deliberately to ease the tension of this mood with the physical pain and still feels the power of silence. She does not yet know that later, the notes of Beethoven will gradually come back to her: "The night was quiet." "God was silent."[29] It is with Mr. Singer that she can talk about music: the deaf-mute is the only person included in her "inside room." All the others are outside: the family struggling with financial problems, the little brothers she has to take care of, the elder sisters she dislikes, the elder brother she had felt deceived by, the father whom she pities for not being in any way useful, the mother with whom she has nothing in common; and Harry Minowitz as well, the sad and clever boy from the neighborhood who takes her virginity. After this event, she cannot find her way back to the "inside room". Portia, Dr. Copeland's warm-hearted and healthy-minded daughter, who helps in the household, notices the change: "What ails Mick? […] What kind of cat is it got her tongue? She walk around and don't say a word. She not even greedy like she used to be."[30] Mick gets a job at Woolworth's, but still keeps hoping for better days when she can save enough for music lessons and a piano.

Dr. Copeland is Singer's fourth "client": they first meet in the street when, to the black doctor's great surprise, Singer helps him light his cigarette. The gesture is so unusual in the Southern street, where young African American men are called "Boy!" the elderly are addressed with the word "Uncle!" Invariably they would be the ones asked to do a favor for the white neighbors. Copeland identifies Singer as a stranger, a Northerner, maybe a Jew. He visits him once to discuss a medical case, a way to help a deaf little boy, and from that time on, he regularly goes to Singer's room for conversation. He has serious problems, basically with his own people. Although he is fueled by the "strong,

[28] Ibid., 93.
[29] Ibid., 94.
[30] Ibid., 240.

true purpose," he is infuriated by the ordinary and innocent response of his folks. He finds no understanding, whenever he tries to explain things.

> Dr. Copeland felt the old evil anger in him. The words rose inchoately to his throat and he could not speak them. […] He sat in a corner like a man who is blind and dumb.
>
> […] He sat in rigid silence, and at last he picked up his hat and left the house without a farewell.[31]

In spite of his learned ways, his Marxist ideas (he even names one of his sons after Karl Marx), he cannot communicate with his family, allusions are made to a "black anger" rising in him and driving him out of control. After one of these incidents, Daisy, his wife, takes the four children and goes back to her father's house and not much later, she dies. The children, however, never come back to him; they prefer staying in their grandfather's home, where they can be safe from their father's mission, his sense of duty and precision, as well as of the prescribed destiny he has in mind for all the four of them. One evening when he is abandoned and grieving, a strange sound comes from his throat – he seems to be the only character able to give voice to some "inner song":

> And after the solitary hours spent sitting in the dark kitchen it happened that he began swaying slowly from side to side and from his throat there came a sound like a kind of singing moan. He was making this sound when Portia came.[32]

Portia is the only one who keeps in touch with him, trying to ease the tension in the family. With her brother Willie and her husband Highboy, Portia manages to build up a balanced and livable lifestyle – until Willie gets into some trouble and is taken to the penitentiary. The tragedy of Willie's maltreatment and its consequence – he loses his feet and becomes "crippled for life" – is like a grave musical undertone to the different themes of the main plot. When Portia tells her father about this, it is like a low, mournful song, and Copeland cannot bear listening to it. He temporarily becomes deaf from the shock: "'I am deaf,' said Dr. Copeland. 'I cannot understand.'"[33] When he finally tries to act and goes to the white courthouse for justice, he, too, is maltreated: he is seen by the sheriff as "one of them damn biggity n****s"[34] and is dragged to

[31] Ibid., 114–115.

[32] Ibid., 55. Perhaps this kind of sound is referred to as "not singing and not unsinging" by William Faulkner in his short story "That Evening Sun" (1931), produced by Nancy in her existential fear. (William Faulkner: That Evening Sun, in W. Litz (ed.): *Major American Short Stories*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1975, 576–590.)

[33] McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 194.

[34] Ibid., 199.

one of the prison cells for the night. It is in the prison cell that he produces the tragic sound again: "He swayed, his head in his hands, and from his throat there came a singing moan."[35] He is released the next morning but he cannot truly recover. He is used up, his consumption ties him to bed for the rest of the novel, although his future is finally left open.

Richard Wright greeted McCullers's novel especially because she was able to talk about African Americans in such a natural way:

> To me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Mrs. McCullers to rise above the pressures of her environment and embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness.[36]

It is remarkable that in spite of their longing for understanding company, the four persons cannot form a community–the only way they are still tied together is through Singer. Soon after one of Singer's most generous gestures, buying a radio for his friends for Christmas, which he obviously will never be able to enjoy, the four people accidentally meet in his room. They immediately become embarrassed and leave soon afterwards. Apparently each one of them would like to have the mute's entire attention. But it must not be forgotten that for Singer, the only person that really matters is Spiros Antonapoulos. He keeps writing to him, and in one of his unsent letters he confesses that he does not always understand his new friends. There is some serious trouble with communication. This might be one of the reasons why another tragedy accompanies the main plot: Bubber, Mick's younger brother accidentally shoots Baby, Biff's niece in the head. He had only wanted to touch her nice pink dress. The little girl survives, but Bubber becomes estranged from the rest of his family – the gunshot also prepares the reader for another one, soon to come in the story.

Mr. Singer has a strange dream before making his penultimate visit to Antonapoulos, and this dream deserves some attention:

> Out of the blackness of sleep a dream formed. There were dull yellow lanterns lighting up a dark flight of stone steps. Antonapoulos kneeled at the top of these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at it as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps. He

[35] Ibid., 201.
[36] Wright: Review of "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter".

was naked and cold and he could not take his eyes from Antonapoulos and the thing he held above him.

Behind him on the ground he felt the one with the moustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind them, there were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. His own hands were huge windmills and he stared fascinated at the unknown thing that Antonapoulos held. The yellow lanterns swayed to and fro in the darkness and all else was motionless. Then suddenly there was a ferment. In the upheaval the steps collapsed and he felt himself falling downward. He awoke with a jerk. The early light whitened the window. He felt afraid.[37]

This dream again invites two lines from Simon and Garfunkel: "And the people bowed and prayed / To the neon God they made."[38] The "cathedral" or "pyramid" of naked worshippers points to at least two ways of interpretation. As Emily Budick observes, there is a religious and a sexual approach to this uncanny dream-experience. Because of Antonapoulos's prayers and his habit of a certain "solitary secret pleasure" that is mentioned on the first pages, the unknown "thing" he holds up may well be something very sacred or something very profane. Budick argues the following way:

Is the thing a cross – or a penis? Does it stand for the divine or the purely human? The purely human as divine? McCullers's text owes something here to Melville's *Moby Dick*. Like the great white whale for Ahab, the thing (whatever it is) is, for Singer, a transcendent object of worship. Deification of the unknown and mysterious thing […] extends down through the pyramid of worshippers. For Singer, Antonapoulos is God.

Singer himself is God for Biff, Blount, Copeland and Mick. McCullers's text illuminates a tendency within human beings to construct a universe of divine meanings, in which discovering the divine in someone or something else is both a cover for confronting the physical and the sexual within oneself and a way of converting the merely biological and human into the transcendent and spiritual. But insofar as the author refuses to write what the thing in Antonapoulos's hand is, she conspires in this process of deification. She makes the text into the seductive god who commands the worship of the reader.[39]

The collapse of the staircase in the dream might indicate the impossibility, the unfinished nature of the uncanny experience, and the pyramid might also be seen as an arrowhead. Thus the whole dream can be taken as a gesture, a

[37] McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 166.
[38] Paul Simon: The Sound of Silence.
[39] Budick: *Engendering Romance*, 148.

reaching out for (unconscious) understanding on the part of author and characters alike, in a state of existential nakedness. This is the moment in the novel when the reader is very much in need of the "hearing aids of the heart." As a counterpoint to this dream, we find another decisive gesture in the climax of Part Two: after making his final visit to the asylum and learning that Antonapoulos had died, Singer goes home and commits suicide. He puts "a bullet in his chest," depriving himself and his admirers of the continuation of whatever his former dream had signified. It is perhaps worth mentioning that right after he learns of the death of his friend, Singer begins in a way to imitate him at his worst, even to the point of kleptomania. He makes a scene at the hotel because of a malfunctioning slot-machine, he even stamps with his feet, starts crying and immediately insists on checking out – after struggling to close his suitcase: "For in addition to the articles he had brought with him he carried away three towels, two cakes of soap, a pen and a bottle of ink, a roll of toilet paper, and a Holy Bible."[40] Stealing a Bible is one of Singer's last gestures – and in a stealthy way; the Bible is present in various direct and indirect ways in McCullers's novel. For example, Biff's wife, Alice picks a verse for Sunday school at the beginning: "All men seek for Thee,"[41] and Mick keeps repeating an adaptation of some of Jesus's last words after the symphony-experience: "Lord, forgiveth me for I knoweth not what I do."[42]

Is "I knoweth not what I do," the only response to Singer's ultimate decision? By killing himself, has Singer destroyed all that he had meant for the others? My answer would be a definite *no.* Although Doctor Copeland is "defeated" and feels that he has failed, his family embraces him at the end of the book. He is tenderly taken care of and moved *inside* of a world that he had rejected. There is an inward direction in this gesture, a faint hope of an authentic homecoming. Although Jake has to leave the town because of a fight at the show, his last section ends with the following words: "There was hope in him, and soon perhaps the outline of his journey would take form."[43] For Jake, the direction of his final seeking gesture is *outside.* Although Mick had to give up her dreams temporarily in order to earn money – and this is more often than not interpreted as a clear sign of hopelessness and failure – her last words in the novel are: "some good."[44] Besides being perhaps ironical, the repetition of these words allows a literal interpretation as well: she might turn in her *outside room*, toward some good; seeing her fate as sealed would narrow down the possibilities of understanding. Although Biff is solitary in the last passages of the book,

[40] McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 247.
[41] Ibid., 24–25.
[42] Ibid., 94.
[43] Ibid., 266.
[44] Ibid., 270.

without real friends and spiritual support, it is during this period that he experiences the extent of all the stored-up emotion in his heart.

> Then suddenly he felt a quickening in him. His heart turned and he leaned back against the counter for support. For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who – one word – love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him, he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended.[45]

It is in this gesture of suspense that the book leaves us, readers. We might feel like Biff, looking into the mirror of the counter and seeing both our distorted and desired images, "suspended between radiance and darkness." What could help us in deciding whether the gesture this book performs is one of seduction or invitation? Perhaps it is the marked *presence* we perceive.

After his moment of agony, Biff pulls himself together, goes *outside* to raise the awnings. "As he went to the door his walk gained steadiness. And when at last he was *inside* again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun."[46]

These are the last sentences of the novel, in which the very last gesture points toward the rising sun. Thus it might indicate an invitation to *compose ourselves* in a pregnant silence, hoping to find, or to be found by mytho- and anthropoetic gestures in a constant process of becoming.

[45] Ibid., 273.
[46] Ibid. (My emphasis.)

COMMON PLACE VS. COMMUNICATIVE SPACE

Versions of Inspiration and Suffocation in Carson McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*[1]

Through Carson McCullers's disturbingly beautiful narrative, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, as I already indicated in the Introduction to this volume (p. 23), I wish to examine how a literally 'common place', i.e. a store in a dreary and dull small town of the American South might turn into a 'communicative space', i.e. a lively café with a community-forming power, enabling the inhabitants of the town to exchange words and feelings, all due to a spiritual surprise, i.e. the strength of love, felt by the owner, the bony and masculine Miss Amelia Evans toward her hunchback cousin Lymon. The novella is special because of its portrayal of a most grotesque love-triangle: Cousin Lymon, instead of returning Amelia's love, is carried away by her ex-husband, the criminal Marvin Macy as soon as he gets back from the penitentiary and the two of them take revenge on Miss Amelia (the only person Macy had ever truly loved but by whom he was brutally rejected in the course of their absurd, ten-day marriage). The peaceful café changes into a stage of dramatic events. It is finally ruined and boarded up to remain a memento of one-time beautiful bonds as well as of unfinished and unholy affairs. The work is just as suffocating as it is inspirational – depending on the atmosphere: whether, at any given point in the storytelling, the air is dominated by the confinement of the 'common place' or by the freedom of the 'communicative space'.[2]

In my present usage, the two terms, *place* and *space* would refer to the same physical entity (the store can be located along the lines of precisely the same spatial parameters as the café), however, 'communicative space' would designate something like a 'spirited common place', opening up a new dimension, where, as opposed to the confined loneliness, so characteristic of Carson McCullers's world, it becomes possible to *share*: the air, the language and the experience. This transformation happens on the level of the story told as well as on the

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Common Place vs. Communicative Space: Versions of Inspiration and Suffocation in Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café*", in V. Ruttkay – B. Gárdos (eds.): *HUSSE 11: Proceedings of the 11th Conference of the Hungarian Society for the Study of English*, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2014, 451–461.

[2] The philosophical and literary approaches to the questions of *place* and *space* show an extraordinary richness and versatility. Edward S. Casey, in *Getting Back into Place*, argues for the primacy of the definite and distinguishable *place*, in relation to Newton's notion of homogeneous and infinite *space*. (12) He even states that "there can be […] no Space without Place" (63), without the concrete whereabouts, it makes no sense to talk about abstractions. (Casey: *Getting Back into Place*, 12; 63.)

level of the storytelling. The new dimension could perhaps be best exemplified by a marked shift from first person singular to first person plural in a memorable phrase from the author's famous work, *The Member of the Wedding*. Frankie, the teen-age tomboy heroine of that novel says the following about her brother and his bride: "They are the *we* of me."[3] When examining the special type of love that blossoms and fades in the sad café, I wish to return to this phrase, in order to investigate the scope of the plural pronoun, how the simple word *we* might be responsible for turning indifference into beauty, beauty into pain, and then again, pain into beauty.

The confinement and loneliness are emphasized three times in the first two paragraphs, connected to locations. The introduction of the town, the house and the protagonist, Miss Amelia is film-like; it resembles the zooming in movement of a camera. In this passage, the town is described as being "lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world."[4] Society city, the next train stop is far away and, as the speaking name suggests, the group of people living in this cotton-mill town are just as far from being a true community or 'society'. The house is even more estranged: "The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute" […] "The building looks completely deserted."[5] With this, the reader is well-prepared for the sight of the strange face behind the shutters, the emblematic image of what has been labeled as 'Southern Gothic': "It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams – sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief."[6] With the emphatic repetition of the sentence that on August afternoons in this small town "there's absolutely nothing to do,"[7] the situation seems to be finalized and helpless.

Unless, of course, it receives the help of a narrative: a way of storytelling that might provide the dull location with a new dimension. And already the third paragraph starts with the following sentence: "However, here in this very town there was once a café."[8] A connection is made between the 'here and now' and the 'once' – a reference not only to the past but to the uniqueness of that past as well. The passage briefly sums up the story to come, mentions the "great gatherings" and the names of the three important characters. It ends with the sentence: "The café has long since been closed, but it is still

[3] McCullers*: The Member of the Wedding*, 35.
[4] Carson McCullers: The Ballad of the Sad Café, in McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café. The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1951, 3.
[5] Ibid., 3.
[6] Ibid., 4.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.

remembered."[9] These paragraphs form a circle in time: present-past-present. It is remarkable that the narrative structure of the whole novella seems to follow the circular pattern, since there is a framework: the description of the dreariness of the town returns after the story is told; once again we learn that "[t]here is absolutely nothing to do"[10] and that "the soul rots with boredom"[11] before the coda of the work, the description of the music of the chain-gang. The dynamism of the possibility and impossibility of communication seems to dominate the whole structure, and this can be connected with the idea of inspiration and suffocation, respectively.

'Communication' is a very important term for Carson McCullers. In "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing", she states:

> In any communication, a thing says to one person quite a different thing from what it says to another, but writing, in essence, is communication; and communication is the only access to love – to love, to conscience, to nature, to God and to the dream. For myself, the further I go into my own work and the more I read of those I love, the more aware I am of the dream and the logic of God, which indeed is a Divine collusion.[12]

I intend to return to the idea of the "Divine collusion" in the course of this essay – now I only wish to point out that she thought of communication as the only access to, and thus, a precondition of, love. On the basis of this, one might say that the 'communicative space' is the space for love, to be furnished and inhabited by love. And indeed, the dreary places go through a transformation when the hunchback arrives in the town. The scene is well prepared by allusions to the senses of hearing, seeing and smelling. It was a soft spring night "when it is good to hear from faraway, across the dark fields, the slow song of a Negro on his way to make love;"[13] "The moon made dim, twisted shadows of the blossoming peach trees along the side of the road. In the air, the odor of blossoms and sweet spring grass mingled with the warm, sour smell of the near-by lagoon."[14] When the strange, sparrow-like figure approaches the company of four men and Miss Amelia in front of the store, claiming to be kin to the woman on her mother's side, and starting to weep – the men would expect (together with the reader) that Miss Amelia, who "cared nothing for the love of man"[15] and was at unease with people who, unlike objects, could not be

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 71.
[11] Ibid.
[12] McCullers: *The Flowering Dream*, n.p.
[13] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 5.
[14] Ibid., 6.
[15] Ibid., 4.

"taken into the hands and changed overnight to something more worthwhile and profitable"[16] would violently chase him off her property right away. But Miss Amelia performed a most awkward and unexpected gesture instead: "She went down the steps and stood looking thoughtfully at the stranger. Gingerly, with one long brown forefinger, she touched the hump on his back."[17] Touching the hunchback is already a sign of being touched. As if her forefinger were a magic wand, the whole scene becomes enchanted: a rare thing is done again – pulling out a bottle from her hip pocket, carefully polishing off the top of it with her palm, Amelia offers the newcomer a drink. As the narrator remarks, "Miss Amelia could seldom be persuaded to sell her liquor on credit, and for her to give so much as a drop away free was almost unknown. 'Drink,' she said. 'It will liven your gizzard.'"[18] The expression sounds like a piece of folk wisdom, one could say, it is a kind of common place in language. Nevertheless, it is brought to life by the spiritual spark, creating communication. "The hunchback stopped crying, neatly licked the tears from around his mouth, and did as he was told. When he was finished, Miss Amelia took a slow swallow, warmed and washed her mouth with it, and spat. Then she also drank."[19] The otherwise ordinary actions have the atmosphere of a ritual. This is strengthened by the voice of the narrator.[20] Besides relating the events, this narrator has a special ability of communicating wisdom, providing the marginal, particular and peculiar story with a universal scope. This is what happens when the significance of Miss Amelia's whisky is discussed:

> The whisky they drank that evening (two big bottles of it) is important. Otherwise, it would be hard to account for what followed. Perhaps without it there would never have been a café. For the liquor of Miss Amelia has a special quality of its own. It is clean and sharp on the tongue, but once down a man it glows inside him for a long time afterward. And that is not all. It is known that if a message is written with lemon juice on a clean sheet of paper there will be no sign of it. But if the paper is held for a moment to the fire then the letters turn brown and the meaning becomes clear. Imagine that the whisky is the fire and the message is that which is known only in the soul of a man – then the worth of Miss Amelia's liquor can be understood. Things that have gone unnoticed,

[16] Ibid., 5.
[17] Ibid., 9.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., 10.
[20] Mary Ann Dazey, in her essay: "Two Voices of a Single Narrator in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*" makes a distinction between the voice that tells the story and a "lamenting voice" that makes the philosophical observations in the text. I completely agree with the distinction of the two voices except I would not call the second one "lamenting", rather the voice of "common wisdom". (Mary Ann Dazey: Two voices of the Single Narrator in "The Ballad of the Sad Café", *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 17, Iss. 2, 1985, 33–40, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20077764 (accessed 23 March 2026).)

> thoughts that have been harbored far back in the dark mind, are suddenly recognized and comprehended. A spinner who has thought only of the loom, the dinner pail, the bed, and then the loom again – this spinner might drink some on a Sunday and come across a marsh lily. And in his palm he might hold this flower, examining the golden dainty cup, and in him suddenly might come a sweetness, keen as pain. A weaver might look up suddenly and see for the first time the cold, weird radiance of midnight January sky, and a deep fright of his own smallness stop his heart. Such things as these, then, happen when a man has drunk Miss Amelia's liquor. He may suffer, or he may be spent with joy – but the experience has shown the truth; he has warmed his soul and seen the message hidden there.[21]

This type of rhetoric can linguistically turn the common place into a spiritual space: ordinary language is transformed to the language of poetry, and thus, beauty is created, the atmosphere becomes inspirational. Two components of this beauty are essential to emphasize. On the one hand, the word "suddenly" comes up several times in the quoted text, indicating that the dimensional spiritual change in the common experience always comes by surprise (even if it is triggered or stimulated by the smoothly distilled whisky), and the sudden change of the narrative voice is equally surprising. On the other hand, it is important to note, that the beauty thus becoming perceptible is temporary – like the life of a marsh lily, it cannot last long. The feeling (and wording) of "sweetness keen as pain" indicates this transience, which, nevertheless, does not weaken the energy or the significance of the experience. It seems that the immense power lies in the uniqueness: the magic that happens is not repeatable at will. When the folktale-like narrative places the story in time in the most common way, with the word "once", the word must be taken literally as well: once and only once. The sadness accompanying the joy might be due to this recognition. When the magic is gone and the air becomes suffocating toward the end of the novella, both the word "gizzard" (referring to the bird-like appearance of Cousin Lymon) and the topic of whisky will return in a completely different context. Miss Amelia says the following to anyone mentioning the hunchback who had left her: "Ho! If I could lay hand to him I would rip out his gizzard and throw it to the cat!" and the narrator adds: "But it was not so much the words that were terrible, but the voice in which they were said. Her voice had lost its old vigor."[22] These are the consequences of beauty turned into pain. Since Marvin Macy and Lymon destroyed Amelia's carefully and skillfully built whisky still, "There is no good liquor to be bought in the town; the nearest still is eight miles away, and the liquor is such that those who drink it grow warts on their livers the size of goobers, and dream themselves into a

[21] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 15.
[22] Ibid., 83.

dangerous inward world."[23] Without the dimension of a 'communicative space' both the word gizzard and the word liquor lose their friendly and familiar atmosphere: the former becomes disgusting, the latter dangerous.

With this example, I hope to have shown how confinement and suffocation in a common place might turn into freedom and inspiration in a communicative space with the help of a sudden spiritual spark, both on the literal and on the linguistic level, and how objects and words can lose the protection of this enchantment with the disappearance of the new dimension. As the story unfolds, there are several other instances of the same process that might be observed. When the townspeople accept that the hunchback Lymon had found a home in Amelia's house (and the rumors of his being murdered by his hostess prove nonsensical), his presence in town livens the atmosphere, since he is a sociable character, good at talking and making humorous mischief, the house itself becomes a communicative space.

> But inside there was company and a genial warmth. Someone had rattled up the stove in the rear and those who bought bottles shared their liquor with friends. […] The hunchback was still a novelty and his presence amused everyone. […] The company was polite, even to the point of a certain timidness. For people in this town were then unused to gathering together for the sake of pleasure. They met to work in the mill. Or on Sunday there would be an all-day camp meeting, and although that is pleasure, the intention of the whole affair is to sharpen your view of Hell and put you into a keen fear of the Lord Almighty. But the spirit of a café is altogether different. Even the richest, greediest old rascal will behave himself, insulting no one in a proper café. And poor people look about them gratefully and pinch up the salt in a dainty and modest manner. For the atmosphere of a proper café implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behavior. This had never been told to the gathering in Miss Amelia's store that night. But they knew it of themselves, although never, of course, until that time had there been a café in the town.[24]

All this change is brought about by the change in Miss Amelia: "Her look that night … was the lonesome look of the lover."[25] No matter how grotesque and unbelievable this instance of falling in love might seem to the reader, it must be taken as genuine and true. Several critical interpretations try to explain how come this amazon becomes carried away by the hunchback who, as Virginia Spencer Carr, the author's biographer puts it, is like a "sick pelican."[26]

[23] Ibid., 84.
[24] Ibid., 28–29.
[25] Ibid., 30.
[26] Virginia S. Carr: *Understanding Carson McCullers*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 1990, 61.

Maybe she is moved by the possibility to help him through her genuine talent in healing (she is also the doctor of the small town, able to cure any illness except female complaints). But it is also possible that, being brought up motherless, Miss Amelia is touched by the fact that Lymon is her kin on her mother's side – this is pointed out by Doreen Fowler,[27] and, that she is more in need of a childlike creature to care for. In Joseph R. Millichap's words, Lymon is "a man loved without sex, a child acquired without pain, and a companion, whom Amelia found more acceptable than a husband or a child."[28] It must be noted though that the first night when Amelia and Lymon move upstairs, the lamplight "made on the staircase wall one great, twisted shadow of the two of them,"[29] and we might agree with the "good people in town", who "thought that if those two had found some satisfaction of the flesh between themselves, then it was a matter concerning them and God alone."[30] Miss Amelia is still lonesome in her contemplations. As McCullers sees it, love is basically a solitary experience. At this point, it is important to quote repeatedly[31] and in full her most famous words concerning the philosophy of love:

> First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons – but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which had lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this. He feels in his soul that his love is a solitary thing. He comes to know a new, strange loneliness and it is this knowledge which makes him suffer. So there is only one thing for the lover to do. He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world – a world intense and strange, complete in himself. Let it be added here that this lover about whom we speak need not necessarily be a young man saving for a wedding ring – this lover can be man, woman, child, or indeed any human creature on this earth.
>
> Now, the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love. A man may be a doddering great-grandfather and still love only a strange girl he saw in the streets of Cheehaw one afternoon two decades past. The preacher may love a fallen woman. The beloved may be treacherous, greasy-headed, and given to evil habits. Yes, and the lover may see this as clearly as anyone else – but that does not affect the evolution of his love one whit. A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the

[27] Doreen Fowler: Carson McCullers' Primal Scenes: "The Ballad of the Sad Café", in H. Bloom (ed.): *Carson McCullers*, New York, Chelsea House Pub, 1986, 75.
[28] Quoted in Carr: *Understanding Carson McCullers*, 61.
[29] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 12.
[30] Ibid., 25–26.
[31] See pages 107–108.

> poison lilies of the swamp. A good man may be the stimulus for a love both violent and debased, or a jabbering madman may bring about in the soul of someone a tender and simple idyll. Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself.
>
> It is for this reason that most of us would rather love than be loved. Almost everyone wants to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being beloved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain.[32]

McCullers makes a distinction between Eros and Agape, when analyzing her own work in *The Flowering Dream*: "The passionate, individual love – the old Tristan-Isolde love, the Eros-love – is inferior to the love of God, to fellowship, to the love of Agape – the Greek god of the feast, the God of brotherly love – and of man. This is what I tried to show in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, in the strange love of Miss Amelia for the little hunchback, Cousin Lymon."[33]

I think the phrase from *The Member of the Wedding*, "the we of me", must be remembered here. The plurality of this personal pronoun shows the spiritual dimension of the communicative space (which, as we heard, can be created in solitude, regardless to a certain extent, of any reciprocity). It is "the we of me" that Amelia believes when telling Lymon all the stories about her father, showing her all the treasures in the cabinet of curios, thus inhabiting, furnishing the upstairs rooms of her house with a warmth. It is "the we of me" that Marvin Macy believes in when he prepares himself spiritually for two long years, getting rid of his laziness and evil habits, before proposing marriage to Amelia. It is the thought of "the we of me" that makes Cousin Lymon follow Marvin Macy, trying to impress him by grotesquely and rapidly moving his ears. And for the author, maybe God becomes "the we of me" when she talks about divine collusion. So "the we of me" is betrayed and ruined when Amelia brutally strikes her newly-wed husband, or when Cousin Lymon helps Macy win the fight against Amelia. The significance of the fight is a slightly different matter. It seems to be a ritual, something both the participants and the people of the town consciously and carefully prepare for, something like a mock-wedding, or rather: the metaphorical – but also very physical – consummation of the marriage that had been suspended on the wedding night.[34] It is a wild and violent fight, with allusions to suffocation in the text:

[32] Ibid., 26–27.
[33] McCullers: *The Flowering Dream*, n.p.; see also Carr: *Understanding Carson McCullers*, 63.
[34] As also observed by Fowler: *Carson McCullers' Primal Scenes: "The Ballad of the Sad Café"*, 79–80.

> Now the test had come, and in these moments of terrible effort, it was Miss Amelia who was the stronger. Marvin Macy was greased and slippery, tricky to grasp, but she was stronger. Gradually, she bent him over backward, and inch by inch she forced him to the floor. It was a terrible thing to watch and their deep hoarse breaths were the only sound in the café. At last she had him down, and straddled; her strong big hands were on his throat.[35]

It is at this moment that the hunchback, in a hawk-like manner, "sails through the air" from the counter with a shrill cry. He "landed on the broad strong back of Miss Amelia and clutched her neck with his clawed little fingers."[36] This way, Amelia loses the fight – and loses her spirit as well. After recalling how she is abandoned by the two cruel and infantile mischief-makers and how she gradually withers away, the narrator still finds it important to add a "Coda" entitled "Twelve Mortal Men": the passage about the chain-gang, the criminals chained together and singing while they work with their pick-axes on the Forks Falls Road. When there is "absolutely nothing to do" in the dreary town, the narrator twice (both at the beginning and at the end of *The Ballad*) suggests that "you might as well walk down to the Forks Falls Road and listen to the chain gang."[37] So far, confinement and freedom, suffocation and inspiration, common places and communicative spaces came up alternately, depending on the atmosphere at a given point in the narration. It is in the music of the chain gang that the reader can witness confinement and freedom, suffocation and inspiration *together*. The twelve mortal men, chained together at their ankles wear striped prison suits and are controlled by "a guard, with a gun."[38]

> All day there is the sound of the picks striking into the clay earth, hard sunlight, the smell of sweat. And every day there is music. One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice, then a great hoarse breath, the sun, the sound of the picks in silence.[39]

It has been noted that this portrayal of mortal men chained together is a

[35] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 80.
[36] Ibid., 80.
[37] Ibid., 4; 84.
[38] Ibid., 84.
[39] Ibid., 84–85.

paraphrase of Pascal's description of the "*conditio humana*", and Emily Miller Budick, in her article on McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, remarks: "The human condition is to exist between impossible alternatives. What mediates between them, what makes them bearable and what is itself a figure for the torment that is also salvation is the single word – love."[40]

Trying to talk about commonplaces without using them, without turning sentimental or flat, I quote Edward S. Casey, who discusses the rhetorical form of commonplaces in his book, *Getting Back into Place*:

> Common places (*topoi*) are general argument forms that are applicable to many given cases. As such, they at once delimit and facilitate the actual arguments set forth by the dialectician. They are cognitive places from which one argues and in terms of which one makes "moves" in discussion with others. At the present moment in historical time, dialectical and rhetorical topoi would be studied under the heading of "informal logic". But we need not study them formally or informally in order to make use of them, which we do spontaneously in the course of daily talk. Even idle chatter or gossip involves moving between the common-places by which we economize, locate and limit our discourse – to the point of engaging in mere commonplaces! It all remains a matter of where we are, and where we are going, in our talk.[41]

It seems to me that the narrator of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* can create a communicative space out of the common places, being in control of "where we are and where we are going, in our talk". The text ends on the note of the word *together* and, in spite of all the sadness, I believe that the narrator offers the possibility to become, at least for the time period of the reading experience, "the we of me" for the reader.

[40] Budick: *Engendering Romance*, 161.
[41] Casey: *Getting Back into Place*, 17.

MYTHOLOGY IN THE MAKING

A Reading of Carson McCullers's "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud."[1]

"Love is a curious thing, to begin with."[2] These words come up in the second half of the story by Carson McCullers, far from the beginning, when the unnamed speaker, an old man, a tramp "with a big nose and faded orange hair" has already told his sad story to the (equally unnamed) young paper-boy in the all-night streetcar café and has also explained to the baffled child that love, for him, is a "science". The midway re-start of the theme might indicate that a conversation about the possibility and impossibility of love must begin again and again, in fact, it can only begin, and never really end in a safe and satisfactory conclusion.

The setting might remind the reader of Hemingway's story, "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place", focusing on a space created for meaningful conversation in an otherwise dark and gloomy world: "After the raw, empty street, the café seemed friendly and bright."[3] In the dark early morning, the eleven-year-old boy, new at his job, might find some reassurance or encouragement, perhaps a few helpful words to keep him going. "When he went into the café, he unbuckled the chin-strap [of his helmet] and raised the right flap over his pink little ear."[4] This gesture both shows his readiness to hear something and exposes his vulnerability: to what extent are the things he is about to hear meant for "pink little ears"? But Leo, the "bitter and stingy" owner of the place does not take notice of him this morning and the boy is just about to leave when a voice calls out to him: "Son! Hey, Son!"[5]

This moment in the text can be seen as archetypical: for the young protagonist, the "normal" flow of events is interrupted by a "voice", that of the tramp from the corner, bringing him to a halt and putting him in the role of the listener. In this sense, it can be understood as the first suggestion of a mythological dimension. The etymological origins of the word "mythology" go back to the Greek *muthos* 'speech, story, thought, anything delivered by word of mouth' and *logos* 'word, speech, recount, reason, discourse'. In its most frequent

[1] The first version of this essay was published as: Mythology in the Making: A Reading of Carson McCullers's "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.", in Julianna Borbély et al. (eds.): *English Language & Literatures in English 2014*, Budapest, KRE–L'Harmattan, 2015, 213–221.

[2] Carson McCullers: A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud., in C. McCullers: *Wunderkind*, London, Penguin Classics, 2011, 56. See also: chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://homepage.ntu.edu.tw/~karchung/A_Tree.pdf

[3] Ibid., 49.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

usage, the meaning of "mythology" implies a set of related stories, with a reference either to concrete historical events or to a transcendental dimension, with a community-creating power followed by a tradition that can be passed on (either by word of mouth or in a written form) from generation to generation. In this essay, before comparing McCullers's philosophy of love with Martha Nussbaum's "Love's Knowledge", I will suggest that McCullers's story presents "mythology in the making" in a peculiarly postmodern way, without the possibility of creating a stable community and a passable tradition. What may still become shared along the lines of this "mythology" is the experience of alienation that the three solitary characters (Leo, the old man and the young boy) individually have to put up with. The temporary existence of a shared place (an ordinary, common place), the streetcar café (also suggesting transition, as if it could move on any minute) and the conversation (which, for a critical ear, consists mainly of clichés, commonplaces), as well as the accidental company (a couple of soldiers, three spinners from the cotton-mill and the three protagonists) still allow a short period of time for sharing:

> The man laid one hand on the paper-boy's shoulders, then grasped the boy's chin and turned his face slowly from one side to the other. The boy shrank back uneasily.
> "Say! What's the big idea?"
> The boy's voice was shrill; inside the café it was suddenly very quiet.
> The man said slowly: "I love you."[6]

The response to this sentence is embarrassment on the part of the boy, a bitter jeer on the part of Leo and laughter on the part of the other men in the café. The reactions indicate the surprise caused by the well-known phrase: both by the fact that it sounds as if it was meant seriously and that it is so inappropriate. This utterance, "I love you", has been so much used and abused that it counts as a trivial cliché without a proper context, and the uneasy context in the story, the sudden silence in which it is uttered, may even bring about a shadow of danger. However, in this café, there is no room for child abuse. (In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* such a protective place is also made special by the power of love.) The old man quickly adds: "I did not mean to tease you, son", and he starts to tell the boy about his story.

Before elaborating on the plot (the Aristotelian "muthos"), I wish to make a short detour by drawing a parallel with a paragraph from a recent work by Brett Bourbon on ethics and poetry, just to illustrate how the phrase "I love you" can be understood as a poem:

[6] Ibid., 50.

> I heard a love poem. I heard it recited in an old black and white film, whose name and story I have forgotten. But I remember a character saying this poem to himself, as if to realize the right intonation, in order to repeat it later to a young woman. When he finally confessed the words to this woman, I said to myself – "That's a poem." What the fellow had said was "I love you."[7]

Although this might sound a bit exaggerated, I completely agree with Brett Bourbon: any time these words are uttered sincerely, they have a weight: they strike the listener as a surprise, as well as something embarrassing, something to come to terms with – just like the genuine literary experience – just like a poem.

Now it is time to look at the old man's story. It is significant that the text gains a rhythm, since the storytelling is dynamically interrupted time to time by Leo's sarcastic remarks, which the speaker tries to disregard, by the boy's uncertainty about who to take sides with, and by the old man's pauses, while he drinks the stale beer, burying his long nose in the mug. As the story unfolds, Leo gets more and more irritated, the boy less and less sure and the man brighter and wilder.

He starts by showing two blurred pictures of a woman to the young boy, asking if he knew her. In the first one, the face cannot be deciphered, in the second, only her protruding stomach is clearly visible. When the boy does not recognize her, he says "That was my wife."[8] And he talks about how he had married her twelve years ago, and how she unexpectedly left her one day. She had, in fact, been his wife for "one year, nine months, three days and two nights."[9] One cannot help starting to calculate, hearing this mathematical precision. The reader can immediately put together a wishful plot: what if the boy, indeed, is the old man's son? The story will never tell that. But it remains a possibility, not recognized by any of the characters. The old man talks about love, and tells the boy: "With me, it's a science".[10] He remembers that before meeting this woman, he had felt pleasures and enjoyed beauty but all these sensations were "laying around loose"[11] in him. And he carefully explains what happened after he got to know her: "… this woman was something like an assembly line for my soul. I run these little pieces of myself through her and I come out complete."[12] The metaphor is quite unromantic but all the more memorable: it brings to mind Plato's *Symposium* and the concept of wholeness in an unusual way. Then the man talks about the two years when he had been

[7] Brett Bourbon: *Everyday Poetics. Logic, Love, and Ethics*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022, 1.
[8] McCullers: *A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.*, 52.
[9] Ibid., 53.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid., 54.
[12] Ibid., 55.

searching in vain for the woman all around the United States, then how gradually he could not remember her face, and how she started to haunt him, overwhelming him with sudden fits of memory upon seeing a shadow or a piece of glass.

> "I would walk around and I had no power of how and when to remember her. You think you can put up a kind of shield. But remembering don't come to a man face forward – it corners around sideways. I was at the mercy of everything I saw and heard. Suddenly instead of me combing the countryside to find her she began to chase me around in my very soul. *She* chasing *me*, mind you! And in my soul."[13]

Then finally, in the fifth year, he calmed down and started to develop his science. He explains to the boy that men usually "start at the wrong end of love" by falling in love with a woman. He grasps the boy by the collar of his leather jacket and asks:

> "Son, do you know how love should be begun?"
> The boy sat small and listening and still. Slowly he shook his head. The old man leaned closer and whispered:
> "A tree. A rock. A cloud."[14]

After saying the magic words, which eventually become the title of the story, the old man talks about the goldfish he bought and learned to love, and about his "graduation" in the field, day by day.

> "And now I am a master. Son. I can love anything. No longer do I have to think about it even. I see a street full of people and a beautiful light comes in me. I watch a bird in the sky. Or I meet a traveller on the road. Everything. Son. And anybody. All stranger and all loved! Do you realize what a science like mine can mean?"[15]

The boy obviously does not understand the value of such a science and asks if the man had ever fallen in love with a woman again. "I am not quite ready yet" is the man's answer, and he walks out into the early morning with a bright smile and the words: "Remember I love you."[16] The boy tries to turn to Leo for some reassurance, asking if the man was a drunkard or a lunatic. Leo says "No" to both questions but refuses to talk the experience over with the boy, who

[13] Ibid., 57.
[14] Ibid., 60.
[15] Ibid., 61.
[16] Ibid.

leaves the café with the only "safe" sentence he can think of: "He sure has done a lot of travelling."[17]

Although the frame of the plot might remind one of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner" (an old man taking a stranger by surprise and telling his story which has a flavor of teaching wisdom and a transcendental dimension), the reader of McCullers cannot be sure about the decisive nature of the experience. The tramp is often called a "transient" by Leo, and indeed, the whole story seems to have a transient quality as well: to what extent the boy has been changed remains untold, he definitely has not become "a sadder and wiser man", like the wedding guest in Coleridge's poem. And how about the reader?

In many other works by Carson McCullers, love is a central question, and almost everywhere it proves to be a solitary experience. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, she argues that all of us want to be lovers, since love depends on the lover alone, regardless of the person of the beloved. In *The Member of the Wedding,* however, Frankie, the teenage protagonist says the following about her brother and his bride, for whom she is hopelessly longing: "they are the *we* of me".[18] This expression wonderfully shows how important the first person plural is for the first person singular: even if love is felt in isolation, the yearning is towards a possible "we". But can a tree, a rock or a cloud become "the we" of anyone?

It is at this point that I would like to turn to Martha Nussbaum's essay "Love's Knowledge", which gives the title to her volume[19] published in 1990, not only because Nussbaum also examines the philosophical questions implied by love through the reading of literary works, but also because she applies the works to the philosophical and the literary reader's attitudes, examining the process of reading and investigating the possible relationship between philosophy and literature. Her examples for two basically different attitudes are from Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, Volume 6, and from a short story entitled "Learning to Fall" by Ann Beattie. She points out that whereas Proust's character Marcel understands love on the basis of "cataleptic impressions", sudden grasps of undeniable feelings in the absence of the beloved Albertine, and his constant reflections keep him always under control, Ann Beattie's heroine narrator discovers love by letting herself be carried away in the presence of the beloved person, Ray. For her, it is exactly the loss of constant control through which she "learns to fall". In the first case, absence and suffering are the decisive experiences, in the second, presence and laughter. It seems evident that the view suggested by "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." is closer to Proust's than to Beattie's attitude. The wisdom one might learn, when realizing what the science

[17] Ibid., 62.

[18] McCullers*: The Member of the Wedding*, 35.

[19] Martha Nussbaum: *Love's Knowledge. Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. New York – Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992.

of the old man might mean, is a solitary wisdom, leading toward a special case of solipsism. The blurred picture, the gradual (and controlled) self-education implies that it is not the other that counts, that, in fact, the other can just as well be inanimate or ephemeral. One can conclude that this is the safest way to love: through self-perfection, the feeling of beauty can be extended, can radiate towards anyone and anything. At the same time, this attitude can also be seen as close to pantheism: the spark of the spirit may be discovered everywhere – but in both cases, mutuality is painfully missing. As opposed to this, Beattie would offer a trust in mutuality, an acknowledgement of human imperfection.

It must not be forgotten, however, that McCullers's message is not only implied in the words of the old man but also in the description of the place and sudden gestures. Through these descriptions, the reader sees all the three protagonists as imperfect and vulnerable human beings. The boy's pink ear, his constant worry about being laughed at, his desperate need for communication expose his innocence. Leo's anger whenever spiritual matters are mentioned and his furtive way of eating his sandwich show a frustration with the idea of sharing. And the old man's gestures, dipping his big nose into the mug of beer, grasping the boy's collar, yearning for a listener imply that he is far from being self-assured, his humble, all-loving wisdom was trained by humiliation. And even if the plot offers no real community for the solitary characters, the post-modern mythology is able to create a community between the text and its trusting reader. On what basis can a text become "the we of me"? The only way seems to be by taking a risk and putting my own life-story at stake, by opening the possibility of a shared experience (not directly with the characters but with their vulnerability) and acknowledging what we have in common.

Martha Nussbaum also makes a connection between the analysis of literature and the analysis of the reading experience. In a subtle way, she connects Marcel's attitude to that of the reader of philosophy and the attitude of Beattie's narrator to that of the reader of literature.

> We see more clearly what our relation to Marcel's story is when we see in what way it entails solipsism – and how that solipsism is overcome, in the opposing story, not by any trick of the intellect but by love itself. We contrasted the sceptical and distrustful demeanor of the reader of philosophy with the openness of the reader of stories. This is in a sense correct. But we must now also acknowledge that it was philosophy, and not the story, that showed us the boundaries and limits of the stories – that returned us to Beattie's story and, so to speak, permitted us to trust it, by clarifying its relation to Proust's cataleptic solipsism. Again, it was philosophy

> and not a surge of emotion that articulated for us the idea that knowledge might *be* something other than intellectual grasping – it might be an emotional response, or even a complex form of life.[20]

Nussbaum concludes her essay by suggesting a possibility for what she calls the "science of life" through an attentive – even loving – conversation of philosophy and literature with one another.

Conversations have been examined in my essay, between the characters in McCullers's story, between the text and its reader, between different attitudes to reading and between a literary and a philosophical text. The topic in all the cases was love. Did we come any closer to its understanding? Can we say that understanding is by nature transient, like the old man in McCullers's story or the experience shared in the all-night streetcar café? What is at stake is whether the post-modern mythology is still in the making, whether after all these investigations, one can feel some sense of community, and whether one still feels the need to re-start the conversations, perhaps this way: "Love is a curious thing, to begin with."

[20] Nussbaum: *Love's Knowledge*, 283.

PART TWO:
COMPARATIVE EXPERIMENTS

DISBELIEF AGAINST DISBELIEF: THE CASES OF GOODWIFE AGNES AND MRS. LARKIN

A Comparative Analysis of János Arany's Ballad "Goodwife Agnes"[1] and Eudora Welty's Story "A Curtain of Green"[2]

If the phrase 'hope against hope' means clinging to a mere possibility that something, though very unlikely, might still happen, 'disbelief against disbelief' may mean clinging to a mere impossibility that something that has happened might still 'un-happen'. In spite of all evidence, perhaps it can still be undone. In such a case, one might become obsessive in undoing the evidence, while this behavior in itself might become a proof of the thing that has happened, as well as of the traumatic deformation it has caused.

In my essay, I wish to examine a 19th-century Hungarian poem and a 20th-century American short story. As I already mentioned in the Introduction to this volume (p. 24), the central characters are both widows who cannot comprehend the death of their husbands, and gradually turn insane, both of them are obsessively occupied with an irrational activity (washing a clean sheet, or planting new shrubs in a jungle-like garden), they both become not only exposed to the natural elements, but in fact, part of them, transforming into mythical figures of the landscape.

Goodwife Agnes had helped her lover to kill her husband – but in the text, she is oblivious of the deed: all she knows is that she must wash her bloodstained linen in the streamlet. Her disbelief is directed against the fact of death and murder, as well as against the fact that the sheet is spotless. Mrs. Larkin's husband died of an accident in the garden, he became the victim of a fragrant chinaberry tree that fell on his car, in spite of his wife's protective words: 'You can't be hurt.'[3] Mrs. Larkin's disbelief is directed against the powerlessness of her own most intimate protective words, as well as against the fact that her husband was killed by her garden; all she knows is that she feverishly must

[1] The cited English translation of the poem was made by Géza Kállay, published in: Géza Kállay: A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission. Lady Macbeth and János Arany's "Goodwife Agnes", in B. Gárdos – Á. Péter – N. Pikli – M. Vincze (eds.): *Confrontations and Interactions. Essays on Cultural Memory*, Budapest, L'Harmattan, 2011, 135–146. The original Hungarian poem "Ágnes asszony" and its translation can be found on pages 135–138, in two parallel columns.

[2] The first version of this essay was published as: Disbelief Against Disbelief – The Cases of Goodwife Agnes and Mrs. Larkin: A comparative analysis of János Arany's ballad "Goodwife Agnes" and Eudora Welty's story "A Curtain of Green", *The AnaChronisT*, Vol. 18, No. 1, 2018, 197–206.

[3] Eudora Welty: A Curtain of Green, in E. Welty: *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, New York, Harcourt, 1994, 109.

plant more and more green life in the chaotic sloping plot behind her house. She, too, almost becomes a murderer: when she approaches Jamey (the young black boy helping in her garden) from behind, she is tempted to take his life by striking him in the neck with her hoe, thus compensating for her own losses – but the sudden rain confuses her and prevents the tragedy. From the point of view of the gesture of abandoning oneself to disbelief, the difference between murder and accident seems to be irrelevant. However, the central metaphors of cleaning and planting might subtly indicate separate attitudes to the disbelief in death, i.e. to the continuity of life.

János Arany, one of the most prominent 19th-century Hungarian poets and a translator of Shakespeare, wrote the ballad "Goodwife Agnes" in 1853. Eudora Welty published her first volume of short stories entitled *A Curtain of Green* in 1941, in which the story with the same title appeared as the 13th piece of the collection. Yet, in spite of the undeniable distance between the age, the nationality, the gender and the genre of the two authors, I believe the two texts may enter into a meaningful conversation, not only on the basis of the similar theme but also on the basis of the two authors' extraordinary sensitivity to psychological subtleties and their power of expressing these in ageless metaphors, as well as on the basis of their precision in observation, especially concerning effects of light. Perhaps it goes without saying, I still feel it important to state that this poem is, to a large extent "narrative" and this short story is remarkably "poetic". Arany's powerful verse, with the refrain "O, merciful Lord, never leave me" sounding like either a prayer or an exclamation of shock or distress at the end of each stanza, also tells a story. Welty's prose, without leaving the tone of colloquial storytelling, also has a rhythm that derives from the alternating description of stillness and movement, and it also contains poetic, ballad-like elements in its metaphors and in its obscure conclusion: Mrs. Larkin is left lying among the shrubs in her garden, and it is not clear if she will ever get up: she seems to have succeeded in planting herself and becoming a part of nature.

Before turning to the main question of disbelief strongly connected to memory, I would like to examine the two protagonists' place in their respective communities, their relation to their society, since their beliefs and disbeliefs are also influenced to some extent by their social situations.

Goodwife Agnes is seen surrounded by "urchins" of the village in the second stanza, whom she tries to hush away saying her "chicken's blood smudged [her] linen". As Géza Kállay has observed,[4] this may be a euphemistic allusion to menstruation, thus indirectly to her infertility. She has no children of her own – although apart from this, very little is said about her private life, neither her husband nor her lover are described in the poem. The next stanza gives

[4] Kállay: *A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission*, 145.

account of the neighboring women asking where her husband is, and she wants to keep them away by saying he is asleep inside. When the bailiff comes to take her to prison, she argues that she must clean her sheet of the spot before going. It is clear that she wants to pretend that all is well, and by playing this role, she distances herself from the others, still, the way she addresses them ("my dearest", "my dove, darling", even to the bailiff) indicates that she is on good terms with the neighborhood and its authorities. Although she is imprisoned and tried, she is not alienated from the community: the hoary elders judging her deed call her "my child", and after seeing her concern for continuing her washing, after recognizing her insanity, they tacitly agree on letting her go and abandon herself to her self-imposed punishment.

Mrs. Larkin (after whose father-in-law the whole small town, Larkin's Hill was named) is in a different position. Her garden is surrounded by a high, wall-like hedge (a real curtain of green), so the neighbors (mostly gossipy ladies) can only see her in it from their windows upstairs. This way, she is both secluded and exposed. The garden, symbol of safety, privacy and virginity, embraces her, she has not left it since the accident. Yet it is also the place where the accident happened, imprisoning her in her memory. The only person she allows to enter this space is Jamey, but she is not content with his work, far from being kind or grateful. She becomes extremely vulnerable in her exposure, and the women judging and criticizing her from above keep no direct contact with her at all. Not that she would care about this in the least: she does not feel the necessity of playing a role for the sake of social acceptance. The only thing she can concentrate on is planting more and more life (the gesture in itself may be a compensation for her own infertility).

So, in spite of the fact that Goodwife Agnes is imprisoned and tried for complicity in murder whereas Mrs. Larkin is an innocent widow, the respective communities accept the former and refuse to accept the latter. Perhaps this is why Agnes is so concerned about appearances, including her own appearance: she desperately tries to convince herself and the jury of her sanity. Out of the three instances, perhaps the second one, in stanza 9, is the most telling:

> She takes pains with her attire,
> Her kerchief neatly arranged,
> Her straight hair adjusted also,
> Lest they think something's *deranged.*
> O, merciful Lord, never leave me.[5]

[5] Kállay: *A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission,* 136.

As opposed to this, Mrs. Larkin wears her husband's untidy overalls, "often with her hair streaming and tangled where she had neglected to comb it."[6]

There is another difference between the two protagonists, which concerns their attitude to light and darkness, so attention must also be paid to the role of light in the two contexts. Both authors refer to light in memorable images. For Goodwife Agnes, a ray of light in the prison is essential, as we can see in stanzas 5-6-7:

Deep's the prison, one ray of light
Can hardly find way to enter,
One ray of sun's the prison's day,
And its night a swarming spectre,
O, merciful Lord, never leave me.

All day Agnes keeps an eye on
This narrow light, slender, small,
She stares it out, – it's so tiny,
It fits into one eye-ball.
O, merciful Lord, never leave me.

For when she turns, right around her
There dance specters, up they wind,
If that tiny light were not there,
She believes she'd *lose her mind.*
O, merciful Lord, never leave me.[7]

By italicizing "lose her mind", as well as "deranged" in stanza 9, Arany seems to suggest that it is already too late, she had hopelessly gone insane. Still, she clings to the one slender ray of sun and associates it with sanity, although toward the end of the poem, in stanza 24, she must lose her trust in the sun as well, since "The sun scorches her dewy cheeks".

In "A Curtain of Green", the scorching sun appears in the setting; the tension of the summer afternoon, and the waiting for the rain is described in powerful words:

One day, almost as late as five o'clock, the sun was still shining. It seemed almost to spin in a tiny groove in the polished sky, and down below, in the trees along the

[6] Welty: *A Curtain of Green*, 107.
[7] Kállay: *A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission,* 135–136.

> street and in the rows of flower gardens in the town, every leaf reflected the sun from a hardness like a mirror surface.[8]

The repetition of the word "almost" in the quoted passage makes the description tentative, in line with the hesitant and vague character (who also *almost* becomes a murderer) and is introduced in the text in sharp contrast with the harsh light:

> Now the intense light like a tweezers picked out her clumsy, small figure in its old pair of men's overalls rolled up at the sleeves and trousers, separated it from the thick leaves, and made it look strange and yellow as she worked with a hoe – overvigorous, disreputable, and heedless.[9]

It seems that the sun is harmful for Mrs. Larkin. It throws light on the hard leaves (whose "mirror surface" she is forced to face), it throws light on her separation from her surroundings, it ultimately throws light on her insanity. For her, it is only the clouds and the rain that might bring some relief.

This difference in attitude to light might be explained by the difference of the time-span of the two texts: "A Curtain of Green" embraces one single afternoon, whereas "Goodwife Agnes" opens up the span of many years to come, which expresses the process of ageing. Agnes is young in the prison and has enough time to grow old, develop "freakish wrinkles", become "misshapen", weather-beaten, ignorant about light or darkness. Mrs. Larkin is also young: when she lifts the hoe above Jamey's head, "the clumsy sleeves both fell back, exposing the thin, unsunburned whiteness of her arms, the shocking fact of their youth."[10] However, in her case, ageing is expressed in her longing for the shade, some "pale darkness"[11] that will come with the rain, some protective cloud of her memory.

It is at this point that memory as well as the crucial difference between the metaphors of cleaning and planting must be examined in the two cases. The stain is an age-old metaphor of sin: the obsession of trying to get rid of it may indicate the need of getting rid of memory, erasing the past. For Goodwife Agnes, disbelief might mean a deliberate act of forgetting about the murder, her excuse is the priority of household duties: stains must be washed. But there is another act of disbelief: the deliberate act of forgetting that the linen she keeps washing is clean. As stanza 21 states:

[8] Welty: *A Curtain of Green*, 107.
[9] Ibid., 107.
[10] Ibid., 110.
[11] Ibid., 111.

For in vain is the linen clean
No sign of blood offered to sight:
Agnes can still see it clearly,
Just as she did then, *on that night.*
O, merciful Lord, never leave me.[12]

So, by the double act of disbelief, by wanting to forget, first the murder and then, the fact that the linen is clean, she forces herself to remember and to re-enact, if not the murder, then the consequence caused by the guilt, i.e. the cleaning. With the words "that night", italicized, it becomes clear that she in fact remembers.

Mrs. Larkin does not at all want to forget, she is rather trapped in her memory. Her different attitude to disbelief is explained in the following paragraph:

> [...] memory tightened about her easily, without any prelude of warning or even despair. She would see promptly, as if a curtain had been jerked quite unceremoniously away from a little scene, the front porch of the white house, the shady street in front, and the blue automobile in which her husband approached, driving home from work. It was a summer day, a day from the summer before. In the freedom of gaily turning her head, a motion she was now forced by memory to repeat as she hoed the ground, she could see again the tree that was going to fall. There had been no warning. But there was the enormous tree, the fragrant chinaberry tree suddenly tilting, dark and slow, like a cloud, leaning down to her husband. From her place on the front porch she had spoken in a soft voice to him, never so intimate as at that moment, "You can't be hurt". But the tree had fallen, had struck the car exactly so as to crush him to death. She had waited there on the porch for a time afterward, not moving at all – in a sort of recollection – as if to reach under and bring out from obliteration her protective words and to try them once again … so as to change the whole happening. It was accident that was incredible, when her love for her husband was keeping him safe.[13]

The text's word for disbelief is "incredible". Instead of trying to forget these details, she deliberately recalls them, in the form of a "little scene", quite theatrically, even feeling the jerking away of the "curtain". It is her aim to re-enact the moment, to repeat it over and over, to make the tragedy un-happen by giving more power to her protective words. She wants to "reach under" the cloud of the tree in order to bring him out with the words, again and again. In a strange and desperate moment of the story, the idea of taking revenge or of

[12] Kállay: *A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission,* 138.
[13] Welty: *A Curtain of Green*, 109.

performing a sacrifice crosses her mind, when she stands above the vulnerable neck of Jamey, lost in his own daydreams. But the rain intervenes, confuses her even more, until the complete confusion brings her to some relief:

> Then, as if it had swelled and broken over a daily levee, tenderness tore and spun through her sagging body.
>
> It has come, she thought senselessly, her head lifting and her eyes looking without understanding at the sky which had begun to move, to fold nearer in softening, dissolving clouds. It was almost dark. […]
>
> Then Mrs. Larkin sank in one motion down into the flowers and lay there, fainting and streaked with rain. Her face was fully upturned, down among the plants, with the hair beaten away from her forehead and her open eyes closing at once when the rain touched them. Slowly her lips began to part. She seemed to move slightly, in the sad adjustment of a sleeper.[14]

The frequent use of the words "seemed" and "almost" creates an opaque atmosphere around the story: the text ends on the note of Jamey running away, horrified, but it is not clear whether Mrs. Larkin will ever get up from her final position. Whether Mr. Larkin is buried in the garden also remains unsaid, but with her last motion, Mrs. Larkin re-enacts what had happened to him. The clouds folding near her repeat the gesture of the chinaberry tree, and the whole event is gentle, tender, as if the protective words had also become effective somehow, now referring to both of them: "You can't be hurt". Planting as a reaction to her disbelief emphasizes the proliferation not only of her memory but of the power of the life-giving words as well, and she finally comes to a rest by sharing her husband's experience, in a sense, planting herself in the garden.

But is there any protection for Goodwife Agnes? By perpetuating her position in the streamlet, she, too, becomes a part of nature. The detailed description of her withering away in stanza 25 seems to indicate incessant pain:

> The ruffled hair has turned hoary
> No strand is dark, none is raven,
> Freakish wrinkles creep all over
> The smooth face moulded misshapen.
> O, merciful Lord, never leave.[15]

If the result of her double disbelief is re-enactment, she must constantly be conjuring up her guilt and pain.

[14] Ibid., 111–112.
[15] Kállay: *A Stain of Blood as Cultural Transmission,* 138.

But double disbelief might end up in belief. The mantra-like refrain, repeated just as obsessively as the movements of Agnes's mallet, might also gain some power and become effective. Perhaps this had already been foreseen by the "hoary elders", and slowly accepted by the community: Agnes, as part of the landscape, gradually enters another dimension where even Mrs. Larkin's protective word might also apply to her: she can't be hurt.

In both texts, disbelief concerns two facts. In both cases, one of these facts is the death of the husband. The second, in Agnes's case is the fact that the sheet is clean, in Mrs. Larkin's case it is the powerlessness of her protective words. The repetitive irrational action that follows their disbelief results in the re-enactment of the tragedy they had wished to make un-happen: Agnes through erasure, Mrs. Larkin through proliferation. Agnes deliberately wants to forget, Mrs. Larkin deliberately wants to remember. Unable to come to terms with death, both protagonists go through a shift of dimension, grammatically speaking, a shift of voice, from active to passive. Both become the objects of their frenzied repetitive activity. Mrs. Larkin keeps planting until she becomes planted in the end, Agnes keeps cleaning until she is slowly washed away by the streamlet, until she is finally cleaned. It is only in this new dimension (or new voice) that their disbelief against disbelief might end up in belief, that they "can't be hurt" and, perhaps, the merciful Lord never leaves them.

CAFÉS AND COMMUNITIES OF THE GROTESQUE

A Comparative Reading of Carson McCullers's "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.", Bohumil Hrabal's "The World Cafeteria" and István Örkény's "Café Niagara"

My essay wishes to investigate the significance of cafés, both in Central European and in American literature. These places, by becoming communicative spaces have the special power of forming communities. As I already pointed out in the Introduction (p. 25), Carson McCullers, expert in giving voice to alienation and loneliness, explains the following in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*:

> …the spirit of a café is altogether different. Even the richest, greediest old rascal will behave himself, insulting no one in a proper café. And poor people look about them gratefully and pinch up the salt in a dainty and modest manner. For the atmosphere of a proper café implies these qualities: fellowship, the satisfactions of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behavior.[1]

In none of the stories that I compare would the cafés fit this description, the three places strikingly lack these qualities. "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." presents an awkward situation in a shabby "streetcar café", calling attention to the grotesque aspects of the phrase *I love you*, "The World Cafeteria" is set in a run-down Bohemian place where horrors are both brought closer and distanced by irony, and "Café Niagara" shows the absurdity of a snobbish place serving nothing but the satisfaction of a perverted and repressed desire to be beaten. Bohumil Hrabal (1914–1997) and István Örkény (1912–1979) represent the complexity of Central European humor through the subversion of the role of a "proper café" – it is up to the reader to decide whether there is any kind of subversive laughter acceptable as a "proper response".

Café culture has its own history, both in Central Europe and in the United States. In Hungary, for example, coffee was made popular during the years of Ottoman occupation, in the 16th century. In the beginning, only Turkish people were entitled to attend the coffee houses but by the 18th century, there were three kinds of cafés (not only in Hungary but all over Europe): the "pipe-houses," where one could smoke, take drugs and drink coffee, the "game houses," where it was possible to engage in gambling and the "conversation-houses," where the guests could talk and read beside drinking coffee. This third type became extremely popular in the second half of the 19th century, when writers, poets, artists and politicians started to make these spaces their second home,

[1] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 29.

spending the time with writing, talking, philosophizing and politicizing. In some cafés, there were programs, shows to entertain the public, in others, it was the peace and lack of disturbance that attracted the customers.[2] Just in Budapest, there are several remarkable examples, it is enough to mention the New York, the Central or the Hadik Café, for instance. The popularity of cafés decreased somewhat during the post-war Communist period but it never ceased altogether. Örkény's and Hrabal's stories call attention to the travesty of a long-time tradition.

In the United States, coffee drinking became popular after the "Boston Tea Party" in the 18th century, preferring coffee to tea was a sign of loyalty to the cause of independence from England. Coffee houses were more and more frequented and by the 1860s, the time of the Civil War, coffee became one of the world's most profitable commodities, American businessmen like John and Charles Arbuckle began selling pre-roasted coffee by the pound, getting rich by selling it to cowboys in the West. James Folger, who sold coffee to gold miners in California, also saw great success. Several other big name coffee brands, including Maxwell House and Hills Brothers, quickly followed suit in the 20th century. Post-war, instant coffee was introduced to the market and remained popular until Starbucks (the brand named after the coffee-loving first mate in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*) opened in Seattle in 1971.[3] Carson McCullers's shabby "streetcar café" in "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." also seems to be a caricature of the ideal, community-creating space.

Nevertheless, in all the three stories, some kind of community is about to form: the reader meets unexpected shared experiences on the part of the characters, pondering to what extent these encounters may be seen as emblematic of a specific culture.

In "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." an eleven-year-old paper-boy enters the all-night streetcar café run by the sarcastic and bitter Leo, to have a bit of rest in the dark, rainy morning at a well-lit, warm place, and maybe some conversation beside his cup of coffee. Since Leo is not in the mood for talking, the boy is just about to leave when an old man, a tramp, sitting at one of the corner tables calls out to him: "Son. Hey, Son!" This could be seen as a mythological moment, a sudden disturbance of the common course of events, reminding one of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner". Still, as I explained in the chapter "Mythology in the Making" (p. 132): I suggest that McCullers's story presents "mythology in the making" in a peculiarly postmodern way, without the possibility of creating a stable community and a passable tradition. What

[2] A kávéházi kultúra alakulása Magyarországon, *Barista akadémia*, 2016, http://baristaakademia.hu/a-kavehazi-kultura-alakulasa-magyarorszagon/ (accessed 18 March 2026).

[3] Alexia Wulff: A Brief History of American Coffee Culture, Culture Trip, https://theculturetrip.com/north-america/usa/articles/a-brief-history-of-american-coffee-culture/ (accessed 18 March 2026).

may still become shared along the lines of this "mythology" is the experience of alienation that the three solitary characters (Leo, the old man and the young boy) individually have to put up with. The temporary existence of a shared place (an ordinary, common place), the streetcar café (also suggesting transition, as if it could move on any minute) and the conversation (which, for a critical ear, consists mainly of clichés, commonplaces), as well as the accidental company (a couple of soldiers, three spinners from the cotton-mill and the three protagonists) still allow a short period of time for sharing:

> The man laid one hand on the paper-boy's shoulders, then grasped the boy's chin and turned his face slowly from one side to the other. The boy shrank back uneasily.
> "Say! What's the big idea?"
> The boy's voice was shrill; inside the café it was suddenly very quiet.
> The man said slowly: "I love you."[4]

The response to this sentence is embarrassment on the part of the boy, a bitter jeer on the part of Leo and laughter on the part of the other men in the café. The reactions indicate the surprise caused by the well-known phrase: both by the fact that it sounds as if it was meant seriously and that it is so inappropriate. This utterance, "I love you", has been so much used and abused that it counts as a trivial cliché without a proper context, and the uneasy context in the story, the sudden silence in which it is uttered, may even bring about a shadow of danger. However, in this café, there is no room for child abuse. The old man quickly adds: "I did not mean to tease you, son", and he starts to tell the boy about his story. As it turns out, the man had loved his wife, who left him, and after failing to find her, he developed a "science of love", starting with affection towards non-human entities like a tree, a rock or a cloud. In the picture he shows the boy, the woman's face is blurred and only her protruding stomach can be discerned – this might indicate her pregnancy and, since the man says she had married her twelve years before and lived with her for exactly one year, nine months, three days and two nights, the reader may start to wonder whether the tramp might in fact be the father of the boy, whether the plot is leading toward a family reunion. This is never confirmed or denied by the text, the reader is left in confusion. The "science" sounds bizarre for the boy's "pink little ears", and after learning from Leo that the man was neither crazy nor drunk, he leaves the café with the only safe sentence he can think of: "He sure has done a lot of traveling". McCullers's mode of narration suggests a kind of mystery and beauty which cannot wholly unfold – the streetcar café remains the scenery of the feeling of loneliness and transience.

[4] Ibid., 50.

It seems to me that in the Central European pieces, there is more of a genuine community – the grounds of which are highly debatable in both cases. Hrabal's story[5] presents us with the "world cafeteria", suggesting in its very title the global metaphor, however, no coffee is drunk here, only beer. The setting is shabby, it's not a café but a cafeteria, or canteen, if possible, as the Czech title "Automat svět" indicates, even more run down than McCullers's streetcar – but it is crowded and it seems more stable, unmovable. The tap woman dominates the scenery – and the plot becomes quite bizarre at the beginning: in the ladies' room, she finds a young woman's corpse hanging from the ceiling over the toilet. The corpse is cut down and laid on the table for dirty dishes – and it remains there as an awful memento throughout the story. The doctor comes and goes, there is nothing to be done except wait for the police and the pathology. The place has to be closed, except the upper floor, from where again and again "boisterous music" is heard, followed by laughter: there is a big wedding going on. The crowd is gathering outside in pouring rain, and a young man with red eyes (probably the tap woman's acquaintance) is allowed inside. He tells the woman that his fiancée who had been playing with the idea of suicide had left him – and the description he gives of her perfectly matches the corpse. However, this is only clear for the reader, the tap woman and the young man never make this connection. The characters are constantly telling incredible horror stories (for instance, the tap woman had seen how a train hit a girl whose head rolled down by the tracks and winked at her) while the crowd outside is trying to peep in, their hands and faces pressed to the glass window look quite grotesque from inside. To scare them away, the tap woman keeps spitting and pouring beer at the window from inside. The conversation is quite absurd, the two characters don't seem to answer each other logically. The burlesque elements continue when the wedding guests decide to go outside, the bridegroom gets into a quarrel with a policeman who is on the way to the corpse in the cafeteria, and he gets arrested. The bride tries to plead – but then she meets the red-eyed young man in the cafeteria and decides to spend her wedding night with him instead. They walk away, the young man entertaining the bride with the story of his frigid girlfriend who he fell in love with while making a death mask for her. The whole plot is a carnivalesque cavalcade, a colorful *danse macabre* of the socialist times. It is important that the young man, beside being an artist and an aesthete, works at a factory where, at the opening of his exhibition of absolute graphics, a chorus of blind children sing facing the sign "We must defend our unity like the apple of our eye".

Everything is exaggerated in this text, and, thanks to the Hrabalian flow of the vernacular, the chaos is hilarious. One can't help laughing – although

[5] Bohumil Hrabal: The World Cafeteria, trans. Jeanne W. Nemcová, in J. W. Nemcová (ed.): *Czech and Slovak Short Stories*, London, Oxford University Press, 1967, 136–149.

taken seriously, nothing but human misery is talked about. The "unity", ironically mentioned in the factory sign not visible to those who face it is made of massive East-European private and public suffering. And this seems to be just as ridiculous as it is genuine. The "palaverers" (typical Hrabal-heroes who keep talking on end about seemingly irrelevant topics) manage to conjure up something like a shared fate in which the parallel horrors are jovially celebrated. What keeps these people together is their light awareness of death – or the emblematic death mask that the bride asks the young man to make for her as well, on the note of which the story ends. The crazy masquerade claims to be global – human life in general is horrifying and ridiculous, however, the flavor of this humor needs a distinctly Central European sensitivity to be appreciated. Paradoxes and miseries of human finitude are profanely and shamelessly exhibited and dissolved in a liberating laughter – with a somewhat bitter aftertaste.

In contrast with Hrabal's complex Bohemian – though, to quote Milan Kundera, quite "unbearable" – lightness, there is something heavy, secretive and shameful in Örkény's likewise absurd story, "Café Niagara."[6] The grand title, inviting the great "western" waterfall to the streets of Budapest is counterpointed by the "eastern" pettiness of the protagonists: a provincial couple, Mr. and Mrs. Nikolits. Their annual fortnight's holiday in the capital is prescribed by the doctor back home, the husband needs to relax in order to cure his bleeding ulcer. After visiting the main sights, and having been to the Opera, having seen a musical and a compulsory Soviet play, their last night is to be spent with something truly special. Mrs. Nikolits manages to convince her reluctant husband to explore a new fashionable place called *Café Niagara* ("Niagara Nagykávéház" in Hungarian), the address of which is unknown by the hotel receptionist and missing from the phone book, still, well known by a taxi driver. The place is neon-lit and unfriendly – but it is frequented by a lot of people, even celebrities, patiently sitting at empty tables. There is no coffee, no beer, absolutely no service whatsoever, so after ages of waiting, the husband gets more and more impatient and hungry. His wife (a one-time dancer and a lover of modern art) tries to calm him by pointing at something happening in the direction of the kitchen. And indeed, a red-faced man in an undershirt stands in front of the kitchen curtains, beckoning the guests, one by one, to go behind the curtain. Every customer comes back with a flushed, mysteriously smiling face and a slight limp. Mr. Nikolits gets excited about learning what's going on, but he has to wait quite long for his turn. When his wife comes back in a manner similar to the others, he finally gets the signal from the man in the undershirt. Because of the retardation of the narrative, the reader is equally

[6] István Örkény: Café Niagara, trans. Ivan Sanders, in L. Illés (ed.): *Nothing's Lost. Twenty-five Hungarian Short Stories*, Budapest, Corvina, 1988, 57–65.

eager to see what happens behind the curtains. Mr. Nikolits is greeted politely by the team and asked in what way he would like the beating: in or without his clothes, would he prefer verbal abuse as well. Seeing his provincial hesitation, the man in the undershirt orders his three employees to get to the job, and they start beating him diligently, rhythmically.

> They didn't rush but worked efficiently, beating him as one beats red-hot iron – rapidly, before it cools. Once in a while, they would let out a shout. "So you don't like the cotton quota, eh?" the one with the truncheon said. "You think you know everything, don't you?" yelled the one who was using a bamboo cane. The third, who had no implement to hit with and was in charge of slapping only, heaped rather more general abuse on Mr. Nikolits. "Take this, you louse! And that, you creep! And that, you swine!" he shouted every time he took a swing at him.[7]

They stop just as abruptly as they started – and Mr. Nikolits, who had been "neither scared nor surprised, since he always had the feeling – no, he knew – that something like this was going to happen to him one day,"[8] now feels a bit relieved.

> Mr. Nikolits, though he had a headache and his knees were shaking a little, was none the worse for wear. In fact he felt rather light and free, as one does after a fatiguing but pleasant hike, or after a good rubdown. His anxiety, which was secretly with him all this time, seemed suddenly to disappear.[9]

He even gives the man in the undershirt and his team a tip, which they thank for with a bow. The couple stay for another fifteen minutes, then go back to the hotel – and the next day return to their "out-of-the-way home town in the godforsaken provinces."[10]

The story was written in the 1950s (published only in the 60s) – and although these were truly hard times, Örkény's grotesque vision seems exaggerated. Why would people wait in line for a beating? What would the company gathered in this "café" (in which the provincial couple are obviously outsiders compared to the regular guests) have in common? The community seems to be created on the basis of secretly felt guilt that the regime could implant into all citizens. There is no knowing when one would deserve a beating in a system the exact rules of which are unknown: punishment can come any time, for anything. The service (resembling a massage or a wellness package) at Café Niagara manages to give a frame to, and thereby to humanize this anxiety: it

[7] Ibid., 63.
[8] Ibid., 62.
[9] Ibid., 63.
[10] Ibid., 64.

results in the feeling of liberation, in line with the last two lines of the Hungarian anthem written by the 19th-century poet, Ferenc Kölcsey: "This nation has been punished for the past and the future" (my translation). Hungarians sing this line at all festive occasions – and the absurdity of these words comes to light through reading Örkény's story.

The three stories demonstrated different attitudes to the basically tragic human condition: the improper cafés became emblematic of alienation, nonchalance and shared anxiety, respectively. In each text, the reader experiences the touch of a ritual: Leo, the tap-woman and the man in the undershirt serving as conductors of the service. Is there a "proper response" to this weird trio? Not without the price of facing one's own alienation, ability or disability to take problems with a nonchalance and acknowledging one's own anxiety, respectively. And then, hopefully, we can all be relieved in laughter.

WHAT IS LOST?

A Comparative Reading of Carson McCullers's "Wunderkind" and Géza Ottlik's "Nothing's Lost"

I compare "Wunderkind"[1] (1936), the first story Carson McCullers ever published, with a well-known Hungarian story, "Nothing's Lost"[2] (1968) by Géza Ottlik (1912–1990). I argue that "Nothing's Lost" might have been influenced by "Wunderkind". As I already mentioned in the Introduction (p. 26), both texts are concerned with music, talent, memory, identity, and most importantly: loss. Notably, it is the concept of loss that also serves as a meeting point between Hungarian literature and the literature of the American South in general. I elaborate on this parallel based on the similarities between the two texts. There are many common points in the ways the two authors give voice to a search for a sense of belonging, the two protagonists' sensitivity to music and art in general, their fascination with what they see as "quality" as well as their disappointment, their sensation of irreversible loss. I show how the parallels between these two pieces might open up a new field for discovery: how authors and texts from two historically and geographically distant regions have similar dispositions when the question of identity is at stake.

At first sight, it is easier to notice the differences: an American female writer – a Hungarian male writer. An early work – a mature work. A young girl "infant prodigy" piano player protagonist – an accomplished 50-year-old expatriate male violinist as a main character. A suffocating indoors story about a single afternoon of a piano lesson – a longer story about the bittersweet adventure of revisiting the site of childhood.

Still, Géza Ottlik might have been inspired by "Wunderkind" and must have been familiar with the works of McCullers, since he edited a collection of contemporary American short stories in Hungarian translation in 1963, in which he included "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud."[3] By that time, he was on his way to become something of a literary icon in 20th-century Hungarian literature, he had already written his most famous novel, *Iskola a határon* [School at the Frontier] (1959)[4] – and later young writers fetishized him to the extent

[1] Carson McCullers: Wunderkind, in Carson McCullers: *Wunderkind*, London, Penguin Classics, 2011, 1–22.

[2] Géza Ottlik: Nothing's Lost, trans. Eszter Molnár, in L. Illés (ed.): *Nothing's Lost. Twenty-five Hungarian Short Stories*, Budapest, Corvina, 1988, 65–102. The Hungarian title is "Minden megvan".

[3] Géza Ottlik (ed.): *Mai amerikai elbeszélők* [Contemporary American Short Story Writers], Budapest, Európa, 1963.

[4] In English: Géza Ottlik: *School at the Frontier*, trans. Kathleen Szasz, New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.

that Péter Esterházy (1950–2016), as a tribute to his master, copied the whole 500-page novel in handwriting on a single page, producing a mysterious and controversial, unreadable work of art in 1981-82. One of Ottlik's own "masters" had been the worldwide better-known Sándor Márai, from whom he learned the disposition of the elegant world-citizen, although he had never left Hungary for a longer period of time. Ottlik himself had the air of mystery about him, he did not have an extensive literary output but many of his sentences became often quoted aphorisms, his words as well as his famous silences testify to an aesthetic value system that is searched for by the younger generations. In fact, he, too, was in search of such a system, or rather disposition, all through his life, experimenting with various possibilities to express the unsayable. As his protagonist, Peter Jacobi puts it in "Nothing's Lost", "A state, a quality that cannot be defined by human language. A feeling, a condition, a climate? A noun, an epithet, a verb, an adverb? The moment of creation perhaps, […] in the perfection, the simplicity of its namelessness. Something that precedes language, the sound of the violin, how can I then report it to the angels?"[5]

This search might already be brought into parallel with Carson McCullers. Larry Hershorn, for example, observes the following:

> The transcendence that most interests McCullers involves a survival of soul effected by a progressing from a materialist outlook to a spiritual state of mind via more ethereal forms of communication, principally music. McCullers' sense of the American artist as quester aligns this transcendence with the constant spiritual searching of foundational American writers such as Walt Whitman. To McCullers, an "artist" is so simply by virtue of that search.[6]

The idea of such a search connects not only the two writers, but the two protagonists (both of them musicians) as well: Frances in "Wunderkind" is trying to find a harmony between her soul and her way of playing the piano, between her childhood and her growing awareness of adolescence, and she is frustrated, but as I will argue later, also inspired by a sense of failure. Almost the same applies to Jacobi, who revisits his home town in order to find a link with the wonder of his childhood through music, to be relieved by a lightness that might replace his emptiness, to fail and still reach a moment of personal enlightenment.

To start the comparison, I would like to examine two paragraphs that give voice to the dissatisfaction of the characters with their own musical

[5] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 91–92.

[6] Larry Hershorn: Tension and Transcendence: "The Jew" in the Fiction of Carson McCullers, *The Southern Literary Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 1, FALL 2008, 52–72, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40593238 (accessed 18 March 2026).

capabilities. In spite of the difference in age and gender, both of them are in search of the artistic power that no longer seems to be in their hands.

> What had begun to happen to her four months ago? The notes began springing out with a glib, dead intonation. Adolescence, she thought. Some kids played with promise – and worked and worked until, like her, the least little thing would start them crying, and worn out with trying to get the thing across – the longing thing they felt – something queer began to happen – . But not she! She was like Heime. She had to be. She – [7]

> […] he was a spy of the angels in the world of humans. And yet, for a long time now, something was wrong. The emptiness he felt when the attack of faintness overcame him was himself. It was not a symptom of his illness but of the way he played. No one noticed because he had learned to play his violin so that humans could understand, so they should not notice that something was wrong. But it was not for this that he had learned to play.[8]

The mode of narration is also similar: through the third person, both narrators subtly imply the inner perspective of the characters, to quote McCullers's other famous teenage protagonist, Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the texts seem to come from "the inside room", expressing the struggle of self-criticism, constant self-reflection. Frances basically blames her age, comparing herself to "some kids", trying not to give up – covertly acknowledging that just a short while earlier that day "the least little thing would start her crying" twice: when at breakfast, her father put an egg on her plate "so that the slimy yellow oozed over the white", and when she had to admire the picture of Heime, the other "wunderkind" in a magazine. First she admits that "some kids" are "like her", then quickly negates it – but her confusion, "something queer" is expressed in the last unfinished sigh of the excerpt. Jacobi, on the other hand, blames the "human" condition: no one would notice that the "spy of the angels" has lost his transcendental connections. For both, it seems, childhood was the ideal state and regardless of the fact that one of them has just stepped out of it and the other has been separated from it for forty years, both seem to be irreversibly expelled from their respective versions of paradise. Of course, both of them connect this with music, once authentically theirs – but not any more.

In the following, I will concentrate on the meeting points between the texts, thematically arranged: music, talent, memory, identity and loss.

[7] McCullers: *Wunderkind*, 15.
[8] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 80.

Music

What is the significance of the fact that both protagonists are musicians? In the case of Carson McCullers, this is a frequently mentioned autobiographical element. The author herself started her career as a would-be concert pianist, and after a rheumatic fever at the age of fifteen, she, too, had to undergo the painful experience of failure. It is also important to mention that she, too, was an adolescent, not yet nineteen, when she wrote the story. Still, in her text, she made significant changes: her own teacher, Mary Tucker was very far from the masculine Mr. Bilderbach in the story, and, when it turned out that her teacher and her husband were about to leave Columbus, Georgia, it was McCullers who deliberately wanted to abandon her pianist career, recognizing her own lack of stamina to continue. In the case of Ottlik, the theme of music is not autobiographical at all. As Mihály Szegedy-Maszák points out,

> Although […] Ottlik's half-sister […] graduated at the Academy of Music and gave singing-lessons, wrote critical articles on musical works and events, and one of his friends, Dénes Koromzay became a world-famous viola player, the writer himself was only moderately interested in music, and he only chose musicians or visual artists as protagonists to avoid direct autobiographical references when reflecting on his artistic activity.[9]

Music has a special power in both texts – and it seems to be the appropriate means to express the emotional turmoil of the protagonists. As Alice Hall Petry observes in her analysis of "Wunderkind",

> […] it is vital that music be the means by which Frances seeks to please Bilderbach. McCullers is not simply drawing upon her own background as a student of piano; rather, she is drawing heavily upon the capacity of music to evoke intense emotional responses, including sexual ones…[10]

Music and sexuality are strongly connected in various literary pieces. One of the works that come to mind, also perhaps because Tolstoy was among McCullers's favorite authors, is "The Kreutzer Sonata", which demonstrates this connection in many ways:

> A couple are occupied with the noblest of arts, music; this demands a certain nearness, and there is nothing reprehensible in that and only a stupid jealous

[9] Mihály Szegedy-Maszák: *Ottlik Géza*, Kismonográfia, Bratislava, Kalligram, 1994, 43. (my translation)

[10] Alice Hall Petry: Carson McCullers's Precocious "Wunderkind", *Southern Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Spring 1988, 35.

> husband can see anything undesirable in it. Yet everybody knows that it is by means of those very pursuits, especially of music, that the greater part of the adulteries in our society occur.[11]

And, some passages later:

> What is music? What does it do? And why does it do what it does? They say music exalts the soul. Nonsense, it is not true! It has an effect, an awful effect – I am speaking of myself – but not of an exalting kind. It has neither an exalting nor a debasing effect but it produces agitation. How can I put it? Music makes me forget myself, my real position; it transports me to some other position not my own. Under the influence of music it seems to me that I feel what I do not really feel, that I understand what I do not understand, that I can do what I cannot do.[12]

One of Ottlik's favorite writers, Sándor Márai also writes about the dangers of music in his most well-known novel, *Embers*:

> It was as if the music were levitating the furniture, as if some mighty force were blowing against the heavy silk curtains, as if every ossified, decayed particle buried deep in the human heart were quickening into life, as if in everyone on earth a fatal rhythm lay dormant, waiting for the predestined moment to begin its fateful beat. The courteous listeners realized that music is dangerous.[13]

And, indeed, among others, Alice Hall Petry's critical work reveals that in "Wunderkind", Frances is attracted to her piano teacher – that she is at least as much driven by her newly discovered but not overtly acknowledged sexual interest as by her ambition to become a successful pianist, that student and master are in a "lover–beloved" relationship. It is still quite difficult to separate one of the drives from the other, basically due to the complex effects of the music she hears and plays. In Ottlik's story, sexuality is treated differently, and does not come to the foreground: quite early in the story, the breaking up with a pianist partner is mentioned in a magazine, her back and long hair is marginally seen on a photograph, then Jacobi reminisces about "the girl he did not marry" and recalls having heard that she had a road accident, finally we learn about Estella, a young piano student, whose childish forehead had attracted

[11] Tolstoy: The Kreutzer Sonata, trans. L. Maude – A. Maude, in L. Maude (ed.): *The Kreutzer Sonata and Other Short Stories*, Oxford University Press, 1924, 299, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/4/4a/Leo_Tolstoy_-_The_Kreutzer_Sonata_%28Maude_translation%29.pdf

[12] Ibid., 306.

[13] Sándor Márai: *Embers* [*A gyertyák csonkig égnek* in the original], trans. Carol Brown Janeway, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2001, 50–51.

him but he was in love with someone else. Furthermore, there is a handwritten letter Jacobi finds in his hotel room, but he tears it up unopened and throws the pieces in the river. Sexuality seems to be a topic he deliberately wants to avoid, in order to find something closer to childish innocence.

The following two excerpts will illustrate other ways in which music means a lot to the main characters:

> Phrases of music see-sawing crazily. Notes she had been practicing falling over each other like a handful of marbles dropped downstairs. Bach, Debussy, Prokofiev, Brahms – timed grotesquely to the far-off throb of her tired body and buzzing circle.
>
> Sometimes – when she had not worked more than three hours or had stayed out from high school – the dreams were not so confused. The music soared clearly in her mind and quick, precise little memories would come back – clear as the sissy "Age of Innocence" picture Heime had given her after their joint concert was over.[14]

> The shape, the location of the staircase was familiar, but it was the stone that he had recognized. Not its grain, not its patterns of shadow, but its essence. Its content, its meaning, at all events, its music. It was in C minor. My God, Jacobi thought. He pressed his hands against his knees as he straightened up.[15]

For Frances, the powerful image of notes like marbles dropped downstairs, the chaotic list of composers' names indicate her confusion, whereas a paragraph later she remembers being more organized, free (the words "soared" and "precise" refer to the desired state) – and this is connected to the picture "Age of Innocence", which she had received from her rival, Heime. "The Age of Innocence", beside being the title of Edith Wharton's novel is also a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds from the 18th century, in which a "sissy" child is depicted. Although the word "sissy" has a bit of a negative undertone ("cowardly", "feeble"), it rather means "neat" and "clear" in the given context. Partly this is why I feel that longing for innocence is more markedly part of Frances's complex feelings. Since the last word of the whole story is "children", there might be a possibility for her to start anew in the end, entering the world of "other children".

For Jacobi, the most important image in the excerpt is the stone that is recognized through its music: C minor. This moment is also an important turning point in the short story. After trying to find something familiar in his home town and feeling more and more like a stranger, he has a conversation with a little boy on a tram, crammed "between the buttocks" of the other passengers. This inspires him to squat down and take a look at the once familiar streets from "bottom height", and only through this perspective can he find

[14] McCullers: *Wunderkind*, 7.
[15] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 85.

the musical stone at the doorway of his one-time best friend's, Ottó's house. Or rather, it is the stone that finds him through its music, but he can only understand this from the child's perspective. He also divides phases of his life according to the musical keys: his childhood is definitely in C minor (so the C minor sonata he chooses to play at the end of his concert is also significant from this point of view) whereas his grown-up life would be characterized by A major.[16]

It would be important to examine the composers and the musical pieces mentioned in the two stories – in a more thorough and musically focused study. Here, I would only like to mention the correspondence between the two texts: the names of Bach and Beethoven, as well as Liszt's "Second Hungarian Rhapsody" that Frances had played for Bilderbach at her first audition, the performance of which inspired Bilderbach's exclamation: "A Wunderkind!" Perhaps it is also worthy of note that the Second Hungarian Rhapsody is in C-sharp minor, only a chromatic semitone above the C minor. In "Wunderkind", only pieces of classical music are mentioned, whereas in "Nothing's Lost" classical and popular melodies seem to be equally important, the text mentions the Siboney rumba and it ends on the note of Jacobi and the blind elderly pianist playing "Yes, sir! That's my baby!", an old fox-trot.

Talent

The word "Wunderkind" appears in both stories: for Frances, it is something like a magic password, a guarantee, a promise. Beside the title, it is repeated fourteen times in the short text.

> *A Wunderkind… A Wunderkind…* Of her he said it, rolling the words in the sure, deep, German way. And in the dreams even deeper, more certain than ever. With his face looming out at her, and the longing phrases of music mixed in with the zooming, circling round, round, round – *A Wunderkind. A Wunderkind…*[17]

Frances feels that her talent is in strong connection with Mr. Bilderbach's appreciation: the word almost always appears together with a vivid picture of his face, his lips, his guttural voice. It is not something she owns: it was discovered in her by her master – and, due to the patriarchal significance of Mr. Bilderbach in her life, it is closer to the Biblical meaning. A talent not to be wasted, to be made good use of. She also envies Heime (who is smaller and physically less attractive to her) for being Jewish – assuming that the natural

[16] Ibid., 81.
[17] McCullers: *Wunderkind*, 16.

ability and feeling for music is more powerful and prolific for the "chosen people". Heime's instructor, Mr. Lafkowitz is also Jewish – Frances feels like being left out of a special circle they are by nature part of. In his article cited above, Larry Hershorn elaborates on how "the figure of the Jew" becomes a symbol for wisdom and quality in the works of McCullers, against the rising fascist and anti-Semitic ideas of the 1930s and 40s – for Frances in "Wunderkind", this wisdom and quality are also evident. The question comes into the foreground with the Bloch piece, which Frances and Heime played together at the concert and which Mr. Bilderbach considers to be a wrong choice ("that oie oie stuff"[18]), strengthening Heime's talent and weakening hers.

In "Nothing's Lost", as Mihály Szegedy-Maszák suggests,[19] Jacobi is presumably Jewish – but the word "Wunderkind" never refers to him: it characterizes his friend, Ottó. When the blind old professor finally consents to accompany him at the concert, he dares to ask:

> "Can you recall anyone by the name of Ottó Grynaeus?" the violinist asked. The old man stopped, visibly reflecting over the name, but did not reply.
> "He was a *Wunderkind*," Jacobi said, "forty years ago. He used to play a lot here at the college."
> "All of them were *Wunderkind*," the old teacher replied.
>
> I wasn't, Jacobi thought. He had once told a journalist, and henceforth often repeated the story, of how he had begun to learn to play the violin for his friend's sake at the age of five. Though in reality it probably happened later. It was Ottó's parents who first remarked on their son's remarkable sense of sound. He could not quite reach up to the piano when he first begun to tap at the keys above his head, and once a guest had heard him reproduce a sound coming from outside note for note on the piano, striking the keys with both hands, rapidly, one after the other as was his wont. The blare of a horn, the squeal of tram brakes, a cry or the ringing of a bell, a dripping tap, the caterwauling or howling of a dog or a cat – whenever he heard a noise he ran to the piano, played what he had heard complete with all its overtones and returned contented to the game he was playing with Jacobi on the carpet.[20]

It turns out that Jacobi doesn't think of his talent as something he owns, either. His major reference point is not his teacher or his profession but his best friend. If Ottó had had a talent for sports, Jacobi would surely also have become a sportsman. Still, there was something, a spark in him – dare we call it love? – that was trained into musical vigor and precision, and made him a famous violinist. This "spark" can also be connected to Carson McCullers: if we quote

[18] Ibid., 12.
[19] Szegedy-Maszák: *Ottlik Géza,* 43.
[20] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 81–82.

the famous phrase of a later Frances, Frankie, the teenage heroine of *The Member of the Wedding*, Ottó becomes "the *we* of me"[21] for Jacobi, just as much as Mr. Bilderbach plays the same role for Frances. "The we of me" designates an even more complex relationship than the one Alice Hall Petry recalls from *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, "lover–beloved". "The we of me" creates a first person plural attitude to the world from the first person singular, offers a major point of reference for one's very being, regardless of the presence or absence of sexual attraction. Sometimes "the we of me" only exists in the imagination – and the relationship, more often than not, is not reciprocal. Still, it is a feeling of absolute certainty, something sure in an otherwise unstable world. In such a context, the "spark" designated by it might be equivalent to the otherwise hardly definable, slippery word, "talent". "Talent" also implies "quality", shared by the person who is the point of reference. For Frances, this professional aspect is clear: she wants to live up to Bilderbach's expectations, in the name of the value system of the universe created by "the we of me" relationship. Jacobi also wishes to "qualify" in the bygone world his friendship with Ottó had created: this involves the attitude of "the brave Indian" in their boyhood readings, who "guarantees the safety of the lady", the secrets shared with Ottó, while spying on the deaf-mute veteran beggar who turned out to be neither deaf nor mute, but the blind pianist of the Parrot bar. He does not recall any of his teachers, but in the back of the neck of the old pianist accompanying him, he recognizes something familiar: the veteran beggar had exactly the same kind of nape. "In the white collar, his sinewy brown neck was infinitely tender, yet invulnerable, indestructible – the neck of a frail little boy and a terrible archangel."[22] This way, he can assume that the bygone world might also be shared with the old man, who calls him "dear boy" at the end of the concert[23] and the two of them might play the old fox-trot (a subtle reassurance of Jacobi's assumption).

Memory

Both works heavily rely on memory – of the authors as well as of the protagonists. In her essay, "The Flowering Dream", Carson McCullers reflects on the writing of the story:

> I wrote "Wunderkind" when I was seventeen years old, and it was a memory, although not the reality of the memory – it was a foreshortening of that memory. It was about a young music student. I didn't write about my real music teacher – I

[21] McCullers*: The Member of the Wedding*, 35.
[22] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 100.
[23] Ibid., 101.

> wrote about the music we studied together because I thought it was truer. The imagination is truer than the reality.[24]

Imagination indeed seems to be truer than the reality in the case of Frances as well: Mr. Bilderbach's figure seems to dominate her whole world. Just before the piano teacher opens the door for her (but after she had heard his voice, calling her "Bienchen" and correcting her language usage), she has an awkward feeling:

> For a moment she had the peculiar feeling that during most of the fifteen years of her life she had been looking at the face and shoulders that jutted from behind the door [...]
>
> Mister Bilderbach. Her teacher, Mister Bilderbach. The quick eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses; the light, thin hair and the narrow face beneath; the lips full and loose shut and the lower one pink and shining from the bites of his teeth; the forked veins in his temples throbbing plainly enough to be observed across the room.[25]

Her memory is enriched by imagination: in her mind, the time spent with her teacher extends throughout her life. She reminisces about many things while waiting for the lesson – but nearly all her experiences are in connection with Mr. Bilderbach. How he welcomed her at the first lesson, how the concert went with Heime, how Mr. Bilderbach bought the material for her dress for the graduation ball. She is willing to belong to him, to his family – she thoroughly observes Mrs. Bilderbach as well, recalls a moment of an embrace between husband and wife and wonders why they have no children. Her own family, however, is only briefly mentioned, she recalls the breakfast with her father – but that memory is connected to sadness and crying.

Memory, for Jacobi in "Nothing's Lost" is crucial: everything depends on how well he remembers, more precisely, how well he can select what to remember and what to forget, how well his imagination can construct a past he needs. If he succeeds, he can stay true to the self he wishes to identify with: the boyhood self with a strong sense of belonging to a friend. So he remembers places, parks, games, homes, adventures, magic words like "guarantee" (the meaning of which was never quite clear to him). His memory is much stronger than Ottó's, whom he finds and loses at the same time.

[24] McCullers: *The Flowering Dream*, n.p.
[25] McCullers: *Wunderkind*, 2.

Identity

Identity and memory are closely connected: it is through the reminiscences that both protagonists try to capture who they are. At this point, there is a more marked difference between the characters, worth examining before looking at the suggested similarities.

Frances suffers because of her provincial surroundings: she wishes she had been born and raised elsewhere, not in "just Cincinnati". It is remarkable that McCullers deliberately chose a non-Southern setting for her first narrative. (Still, the Midwestern town got its name from the Society of the Cincinnati, the nation's oldest patriotic organization, consisting of the descendants of the officers of the American Revolution, and one of its thirteen centers was founded in Georgia in 1783). Frances, however, does not appreciate the city's significance, she is permanently longing for more exotic, faraway places, other languages. One of the main causes of her attraction to Mr. Bilderbach is that he speaks Dutch and German, that he has lived in Europe, seen the world. (This type of longing can be seen in other works by McCullers as well, for example, Frankie wishes to see snow in *The Member of the Wedding*.) Frances's random examples for what she would like to learn in the foreign languages are not accidental, either: "How do you say *cheese* in German? Mister Bilderbach, what is Dutch for *I don't understand you*?"[26] Saying "cheese" is idiomatically connected with smiling for a photograph, so the question might also mean something like "How can you show happiness and contentment with a German mindset"? And the other question, of course, implies misunderstanding, which has slowly developed between student and teacher – perhaps in Dutch, Mr. Bilderbach would become more aware of Frances's confusion and they could reach some kind of an understanding. For Frances, the two names also cause a kind of identity problem: "Bienchen" (the name the reader hears first from Mr. Bilderbach, meaning "little bee") indicates her cute child-self, and the teacher only calls her by her real name when she makes gross mistakes in music. This encourages her strife to become more infantile, to fit the stereotype of the "wunderkind" imposed on her by her "master".

Jacobi's identity crisis has a completely different source: he has seen too much of the world, he needs a stable sense of belonging to a place ("A state, a quality that cannot be defined by human language. A feeling, a condition, a climate?"[27]), and he connects this with the site of his childhood. In his case the problem of belonging to the East or to the West is also relevant: with his western career and mindset, he wishes to find his eastern home. The story is one of the many narratives about the impossibility of such a project: on the one hand, because he idealizes the otherwise far from ideal eastern situation

[26] Ibid., 8.
[27] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 91.

and connects it to a past from which it has been deliberately and forcibly disconnected, on the other hand, because the western mindset does not allow him to accept the paradoxical assumption of his friend Ottó, that "nothing is lost" when everything, concerning his friend's talent, career, memory, social status and prospect for life is visibly and tangibly lost in the country where Ottó had to stay in the post–second-world-war period.

McCullers could have connected Frances's crisis with the difference between the "northern" and "southern" mindset – but she tried to avoid this question at least as much as Ottlik tried to avoid the question of sexuality. Still, some telling "sparks" in her text testify to a consciousness of failure and a loneliness that may be identified as "southern" (of course, it would not be wise to rely on stereotypical representation, but perhaps the sense of quality, elitism, Europe-oriented interest, as well as the self-pitying sensitivity and the handling of her loss could be such signs). In this sense, there is a parallel with the Hungarian stereotype: the paradox of belonging somewhere where it is a burden to stay, the love-hate relationship between the individual and his or her home, a sense of guilt because of complex historical reasons, most importantly because of having fought for a "lost cause" in various cases of political turmoil.

In Ottlik's case, one can also detect subtle "sparks" of hidden eroticism, in the way he describes the old pianist's neck, for example.

Thus, in both texts, the quest for identity is both blissfully and painfully connected with the quest for, as well as the denial of, certain "sparks" and a search for innocence as the ideal state of being. Both characters run into paradoxes, which result in the feeling of loss and alienation.

Loss

Both Frances and Jacobi have to go through the loss of something that is probably dearest to them: their notion, image or concept of "the we of me".

> Her coat. The mittens and galoshes. The schoolbooks and the satchel he had given her on her birthday. All from the silent room that was hers. Quickly – before he would have to speak.
>
> As she passed through the vestibule she could not help but see his hands – held out from his body that leaned against the studio door, relaxed and purposeless. The door shut to firmly. Dragging her books and satchel she stumbled down the stone steps, turned in the wrong direction, and hurried down the street that had become confused with noise and bicycles and the games of other children.[28]

[28] McCullers: *Wunderkind*, 22.

Frances feels that through the loss of her talent, she is losing the benevolence of Mr. Bilderbach, and ultimately, she is losing her childhood, her exceptional state of being, therefore she must run out to the street "confused with noise and bicycles and the games of other children"[29] This last gesture is most often interpreted as a regressive step, running away from a problem instead of facing it, an immediate unconscious response to obvious failure. However, I maintain that the last words of the text, "other children" have a special significance: maybe now, after tearing herself away from the person and the world that has dominated her life so far, she may consciously turn toward the world of "other children", from an imagined safety to an uncertain reality – and she may even be mature enough to cherish the experience of failure that made her wiser. In that sense, her last gesture is not only an exit but an entrance as well – similarly to the way McCullers started an entirely new life after the trauma of the loss of her musical career. Frances might be confused, she may turn "in the wrong direction", still, the story ends on the note of freedom from the suffocating indoors, and may as well carry a breath of hope in the end.

Jacobi, with the help of the musical stone, finds the house of Ottó, and, to his surprise, finds Ottó himself, whom he had thought to have died long ago. The aging Ottó is giving a home-concert to the neighbors in the one-time nursery of their apartment. This is the only room left of the flat for him and his wife, the one-time nanny, whom he married for the purpose of keeping at least part of the old apartment. (For a married couple, the regulations allowed this much, although complete strangers were forcefully moved to the other rooms.) The nursery is crammed with old furniture, and Ottó's piano music gives Jacobi a headache: he plays as if he had injured his hand, the performance of the Chopin piece is very far from being perfect. Although Ottó recognizes Jacobi, he no longer remembers the childhood secrets, and he is not interested in Jacobi's concert at all. With an infantile smile, he keeps repeating how "nothing is lost".

> "You were surprised, weren't you," he whispered, "to find me here in the flat? To find that nothing is lost, everything's the same, what?"
> I really must decide, Jacobi thought, to give up smoking for good. He began to feel dizzy again.
> "And we've lived through hard times. You don't know how hard, Péter," Ottó Grynaeus whispered. "But nothing's lost, everything's the same. You were surprised, what, old boy?"
> "I was," Jacobi answered quietly. "Word of honour."
>
> The pressure increased in his head. On the street he lost his balance for a moment, staggered. The next day he did not get up until late afternoon. He went for a walk,

[29] Ibid.

> had some milk sent up to his room and lay down again. He woke up at dawn from a deep sleep. It was half past five. He was at pains to understand what had happened to him. He had been relieved of a great burden.
>
> He did not feel anything. He had been tangibly stripped of all feeling of pressure, paralysis, bad emptiness. Inside he was cleanly, lightly, pleasantly empty, like the clean, light, unregistered dawn approaching at his window.[30]

There is a similarity between Frances's and Jacobi's relief: they both get outdoors in these excerpts, from a burdensome indoors scene with their respective "we of me"-s. In this sense, both scenes imply a sense of freedom, as well as a sense of irreversible loss: it is unlikely that Frances would ever go to Mr. Bilderbach for a piano lesson or that Jacobi would ever meet Ottó again. Ottlik's work, however, does not end with this scene of exit and entrance. There is a last part, in which the concert is described. He can relate to the old pianist that he had found his friend, to which the old man's answer is "Of course."[31] In the old pianist, his childhood memories seem to be reassured, he finds someone, temporarily, only for the duration of this concert, with whom he can share the job of "being a spy of the angels among humans". He can play exceptionally well, although there is a small audience. And at the end of the concert, the old man says "dear boy" to him, a kind of appraisal he had never received throughout his career. The story ends with the old fox-trot: Yes! Sir! That's my baby!, which sounds like an ultimate "yes" for his assumptions, indeed, the old pianist might be identical with the veteran beggar, the musician of the Parrot bar.

So, what is lost? In both stories, a sense of security, a sense of belonging, a sense of permanence in the world is gone. Both protagonists are forced to accept this. At the same time, they might find their identities in the loss itself: they are the ones who had been given and deprived of the enriching experience of a "we of me", and who have also experienced a horrifying and relieving freedom at the end. Is this enough to connect two authors and texts from historically and geographically distant regions? This is left to be decided by readers who are by nature spies of the angels among the humans.

[30] Ottlik: *Nothing's Lost*, 99.
[31] Ibid., 101.

CONCLUSION

RECURRING MOTIFS

At the end of this volume, in the aftermath of the reading experiences, I would like to list a few meeting points concerning the individual close readings as well as the comparative studies. As I argued in the Introduction, the "sudden sparks" celebrated in my essays, when the texts, their authors and readers may enter into a meaningful conversation may be coincidental, momentary, and transitory. Nevertheless, the impressions and the effects, as well as the joy of the Cavellian "good encounters" may be strong and long lasting. In seven points, I will now try to enumerate the main motifs recurring in the texts and in my interpretations.

1. Communication and mystery

As the title of the volume also suggests, both the problems of communication and the possibilities for the presentation of mystery appear as pivotal issues in all of the examined texts. As I also pointed out in the Introduction, on the basis of the writers' thoughts about their own work, all the three authors were concerned with both of these questions.

In Eudora Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman", Bowman experiences a serious communication problem when confronted with the strange woman after his accident: his otherwise ready sentences for meeting a new customer do not seem to work, and he misunderstands the whole situation, not being able to give voice to his sudden feelings. The mystery appears in his surprising sensation of his heartbeats, as well as in his recognition of "[a] marriage. A fruitful marriage" existing between the woman and her husband, Sonny. In "A Still Moment", communication is silenced into the internal monologues of the three protagonists (Lorenzo, the preacher, Murrell, the bandit, and Audubon, the artist), emphasizing their alienation and isolation in spite of sharing the vision of the same white heron. Mystery is presented through what Audubon calls "the old stab of wonder": wonder at the beauty of the bird, at the coincidental shared moment, as well as at the possibility of preserving all this at the expense of killing the bird. The word "stab" indicates violence and shows that the mystery or wonder is far from being sentimental.

In Flannery O'Connor's stories, the difficulty of communication comes up in various ways: "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" testifies to the struggle of the child protagonist with language, not finding a way to express herself or to understand her older cousins. Mystery, however, is manifested in the way she thinks of the titular term "a temple of the holy ghost" as of a neatly wrapped

present, as well as in the way her innocent mind can connect the sacred and the profane exposure of a body with the sentence "God made me thisaway". In "The River", there is an obvious communication gap between the parents and their child, as well as between the child and his babysitter, the child and the preacher. The whole tragedy can be seen as a result of fatal misunderstandings. Still, there is a chance for mystery, if one interprets the actual death of the child on the anagogical level, as a way of finding shelter from an otherwise indifferent and cruel world, where he can actually "count". In "Good Country People", communication fails both on the level of platitudes or commonplaces and on the level of philosophy: Hulga's isolation is painful, neither with her mother, nor with her seducer, Manley Pointer can she come to an understanding. The "moment of grace" is reduced to the realm of the "almost" (logically an absolute "no", teleologically a slim chance of a "yes"). In spite of her complete abandonment, her exposed existential nakedness at the end still allows a slight hope for acceptance. "The Displaced Person" testifies to a clearcut division between the "us" (the inhabitants of the southern world: Mrs. McIntyre, the Shortleys, Astor and Sulk) and the "them" (the outsiders: Father Flynn and the Guizack family). As it turns out, there is no real understanding between the southern company either, each character ends up displaced and isolated. Mystery is present only in the feathers of the peacock, admired by Father Flynn whom the others ridicule, or in the phrase "true country", referring to a realm unattainable on earth, in the three-dimensional world. "Parker's Back" shows misunderstanding between O.E. Parker and his wife, Sarah Ruth. The most important attempt at communication, the tattoo of the large Byzantine Christ fails to move or please the woman. Still, some moments may be interpreted as "moments of grace": Parker's initial fascination with the tattooed man in his adolescence, his own sensation of organic beauty before entering the house with the new tattoo, and the final moment, when Parker is swept out of the house, crying like a baby, which might suggest that, in his abandonment, the possibility of rebirth is inherent. "Judgement Day" is also full of misunderstanding: Tanner is unable to accept that his pedagogical sensitivity that used to work in the South is of no use whatsoever in the North. The idea of being out of place is emphasized throughout the text, and there is a generational conflict between him and his daughter as well. He seems to provoke the black neighbor's cruel revenge – and the only reference to any type of mercy or grace can be found in Tanner's last sentence ("I'm on my way home"), or in the final gesture of the daughter of having his body re-buried in Corinth.

In Carson McCullers's works, communication is also very problematic for the characters, for different obvious and less obvious reasons. Mystery, however, always appears as a sudden and transitory "sweetness, keen as pain,"[1] with the

[1] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 15.

experience of the expansion of the heart and the solitary and short sensation of belonging to a "we of me."[2] In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Mr. Singer, being deaf and mute, can only communicate in writing and with the gestures of his hands. Still, his ability to listen to others makes him suitable for the role of a secular father confessor, creating communicative bonds with his four "clients," Mick, Biff Brandon, Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland. The real problems of communication for him are related to his one-time closest companion, the Greek Antonapoulos. The other characters also get tangled up in misunderstandings and embarrassment, all of them feel like lonely outsiders. Yet, for each of them, mystery or spirituality may also be experienced, most strongly perhaps for Mick, whose "inside room" becomes enchanted by music. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, communication is so much at stake that the very possibility of a communicative space is dependent on mystery: the unrequited love of Miss Amelia for Cousin Lymon. Since according to McCullers, love is a solitary feeling, there is no hope for understanding or reconciliation between the characters. The intense joy of the expansion of the heart remains private, just like the pain of abandonment felt afterwards. "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." presents one-sided communication between basically lonely characters as well, and the "pink little ears" of the eleven-year-old paper-boy cannot grasp the grown-up tragedy and wisdom they hear from the elderly tramp. The text testifies to a postmodern mythology in the making, where mystery inevitably gets intertwined with transience.

In Part Two of the volume, communication and mystery remain primary issues, both for the characters of the compared texts and for the analyses. I trust that the works can communicate with one another, in spite of the temporal and cultural differences. Both Arany's Goodwife Agnes and Welty's Mrs. Larkin are isolated widows who can hardly communicate with their neighbors, but both of them are surrounded by the mystery of nature, which they finally become a part of. When "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." is compared with Hrabal's "The World Cafeteria" and Örkény's "Café Niagara," communication is characterized by absurdity: the paper-boy cannot understand what he is told by the tramp, Hrabal's "palaverers" keep talking past each other, not even noticing the resemblance of the missing girlfriend to the corpse on the counter, and Mr. and Mrs. Nikolits cannot understand what's going on in Café Niagara for a long time. The mystery is also connected to absurdity: the old tramp's obsession with his science of love, the Hrabalian grotesque *danse macabre*, and the bizarre beating service in Örkény's story seem to give some – debatable – relief. In the comparison of McCullers's "Wunderkind" and Ottlik's "Nothing's Lost", communication problems are mainly caused by the difference between childhood and adult identity. It is the childhood self both Frances and Jacobi long

[2] McCullers: *The Member of the Wedding*, 35.

for and from this perspective, growing up is connected with the experience of irreparable loss. Mystery still appears in Jacobi's memories of being a spy of the angels among the humans and in Frances's final decision of turning towards other children, no longer wanting to be a "wunderkind".

Both communication and mystery can also be connected to the mode of narration (the way in which the attitudinal shift from the "what" to that of the "how" gets manifested in all the three authors' works), as well as to the mode of reading (when the readers are also able to make the attitudinal shift, recognizing not only the occasional autobiographic references but the importance of the extent to which the texts might refer to communication problems and sudden sparks of mystery in their own lives as well).

2. The role of non-verbal gestures

In the following six points, I will mention the possible common motifs in less detail, alluding only to the most prominent examples.

Gestures in narratives might be so subtle that they can hardly be discovered at first reading. So small that one's attention might skip them, since (in spite of the fact that they are invariably movements) they do not necessarily become main *motives* in a text, they do not seem to move the plot forward, consequently they do not seem to contribute to the cognitive comprehension of what one is actually reading. Yet they are concrete, verbally described bodily movements which can be perceived as markers of *relation.* In this volume, I go so far as to say that these minimal markers might constitute the soul of a narrative. In my reading, gestures always indicate the ontological status of being-towards-another, they may be seen as vectors with a definite direction – at the same time, they might imply a sense of being unfinished or being without response, and in this sense, they may be seen as vague attempts at communication.

Non-verbal gestures gain a special significance in Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman", where I analyze the "bow" and the archetypal motif of the fall. I also concentrate on the gestures of the characters of Flannery O'Connor, especially in "The River", when the little boy is ushered by hands and feet towards his tragic destiny, and in "Good Country People", when ordinary and seemingly irrelevant details like Hulga talking with her mouth half full unwillingly expose her vulnerability. I give a more detailed study of gestures in the analysis of McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, referring to the mythopoetical research of Roman Katsman. In the comparative analysis of Arany's "Goodwife Agnes" and Welty's "A Curtain of Green", the gestures of washing and planting, respectively, gain symbolic significance.

In the future, I intend to widen my research concerning the role of gestures in literature, taking into account Giorgio Agamben's[3] and other scholars' theories as well.

3. The importance of childhood, innocence and vulnerability

Throughout the volume, I pay special attention to the exposure of vulnerability, which is often connected with allusions to, or reminiscences of, childhood. This vulnerability is seen in my essays as the condition for an existential nakedness, reconstructing the characters' state of innocence to a certain extent, evoking the author's (and possibly, the reader's) compassion.

In Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman", Bowman's reminiscence of his grandmother's bed, the image of the car as a grotesque baby cradled by the grapevines, as well as the pregnancy of the woman and Bowman's wish for being protected like a child indicate his vulnerability. The protagonists in Flannery O'Connor's "The Temple of the Holy Ghost" and "The River" are children: their perspective brings up the question of responsibility both on the part of the author and the reader. In "Good Country People", Hulga is seen by her mother (and partly, through compassion, by the reader) as a helpless child, and in "Parker's Back", the main character is shown crying like a baby in the end. In McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick's adolescent struggles emphasize her vulnerability, but there are other observations showing concern for children as well, e.g. the tragic isolation of Mick's little brother, Bubber or Biff Brannon's contemplations about his sister-in-law's four-year-old daughter, Baby. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, one of the possible reasons why Amelia falls in love with Cousin Lymon might be the fact that she sees him as a child in need, her love being more powerful as "agape" than as "eros". "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud." also has a child in the center, the paper-boy's perspective adds absurdity and vulnerability to the actual story told by the tramp. Among the comparative analyses, it is mainly the third essay that concentrates on the question of childhood, both for Jacobi in Ottlik's "Nothing's Lost" and for Frances in McCullers's "Wunderkind", their childhood identity is the idealized, innocent state they long to return to.

[3] Giorgio Agamben: *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1999.

4. The significance of humor and self-irony: the interplay between the profane and the sacred

As I mentioned in the Introduction to this volume, what fascinated me in the works of the three authors was first and foremost their grotesque sense of humor as well as their capacity for sharp self-irony. In the individual essays, I give voice to my appreciation in various ways.

I make a distinction between derision (exclusive laughter, "laughing at" something or someone) and self-irony (inclusive laughter, "laughing with" someone). Keeping in mind the original meaning of the word "humor", i.e. 'body fluid', 'liquid', I argue that the works I analyze present a unique blend of these two attitudes – constituting a shared sense of identity with which the reader, regardless of where she or he is from, has a choice to identify. In the case of ridicule or derision, the community is built against another group, humor becomes normative (as seen, for example, in O'Connor's "The Displaced Person") because it forms a group of *us*, normal people, against the group of *them*, the 'abnormal', who 'we' may freely *laugh at*. This is what I call "exclusive" humor, because it necessarily excludes the targeted group from the possibility of sharing that laughter. It causes pleasure to those laughing and pain to those laughed at. The other, in my mind, much more subtle kind of humor is that of self-irony (as demonstrated, for example, in the Central European stories of Hrabal and Örkény, as well as in Welty's, O'Connor's and McCullers's attitude to the American South), where the group of *us* is formed against the group of *us*, when 'we', in our 'normal' mind, are able to *laugh with* whatever is 'abnormal' about ourselves. This is what I call "inclusive" humor, since in the possibility of laughter, the targeted group is necessarily included. Although it may seem like an easy affair, this process is far from being simple and painless. Pain and laughter take turns, with equal vehemence in the case of self-irony. Whatever is shown as "laughing matter" may always just as well be seen as "crying matter", and vice versa. I claim that the "inclusive" type of humor is often the result of a blending of the profane and the sacred, the ordinary and the extraordinary, thus it becomes strongly connected to faith (most prominently in Welty's "A Still Moment", O'Connor's "The Temple of the Holy Ghost", "The River", and "Parker's Back", as well as in McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* or "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud."). These works present a type of humor that resists stereotypical interpretation. With the presence of violence, cruelty and self-irony, the texts also avoid sentimentality. Still, spirituality is preserved through the all-embracing humor, so the texts and the authors might even offer to become "the we of me" for the reader.

In my future works, I wish to investigate the fantastic intrinsic relationship between faith and humor in more detail.

5. Eyes and perspectives: seeing and being seen

The significance of sight, perspective, reflections of light and the uncanny perception of being seen by others is evident in the works of all the three authors. Since photography was among Eudora Welty's lifelong interests, her stories show an exceptional awareness of keen observation. It is not by accident that her collection of essays about writing bears the title *The Eye of the Story*.[4] In "Death of a Traveling Salesman", for example, small details connected to light and sight might become symbolic, e.g. the half-cleaned lamp, or Sonny's way of looking: "There was an effort even in the way he was looking, as if he could throw his sight out like a rope."[5] In "A Still Moment", it is through a subtlety of gestures and glances that a complicated geometrical choreography develops and becomes a substitute for verbal communication between the characters. There the artist's (Audubon's) way of seeing and preparing the work for "a stranger's sight" is also highly at stake, which I will take into account when writing about reflections on art. In Flannery O'Connor's texts, sight and vision often become likewise emphasized. In "The Displaced Person", Mrs. McIntyre seems to repeat Mrs. Shortley's way of looking around with folded arms, as if she possessed the whole countryside, and in the same story, there is a look between her, Mr. Shortley and Sulk that suggests words like murder and conspiracy: "She had felt her eyes and Mr. Shortley's eyes and the Negro's eyes come together in one look that froze them in collusion forever."[6] As I pointed out in the essay, perhaps it is not so much the tragedy itself as this look that displaces them from their own environment. "Parker's Back" is the story that focuses on "all demanding" eyes to the greatest extent: in my essay, I investigate the possible interpretations of seeing and being seen with the help of Sartre's concept of "the gaze of the other." When writing about "Judgement Day", I focus on the analysis of three interracial glances transgressing different boundaries. In Carson McCullers's works, there are also many examples for the emphasis on sight, I will now restrict myself to a quote from *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, which seems to echo the already mentioned look of Sonny in Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman": It is Biff Brannon who "took in the room with a glance like a lasso."[7]

I am completely convinced that further investigations in the field would disclose many more examples that might become the subject of a separate study. Sight and view taken metaphorically as well as literally might open up a wide scope of new possibilities of interpretation. Here, I only wish to call

[4] Eudora Welty: *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays & Reviews*, New York, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 1990.
[5] Welty: *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, 1474.
[6] O'Connor: *The Displaced Person*, 234.
[7] McCullers: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, 182.

attention to the "sudden sparks" of such directions, while in the future, I might get engaged in a more detailed and thorough research on the topic.

6. The perceptions of the heart

Literal and metaphorical attention to the heart as a bodily organ as well as a traditional symbol of love is also a frequently recurring motif of the texts that I examined. In the essay on Welty's "Death of a Traveling Salesman", the literal heart-sensations inspired me to interpret the setting and the flow of the story as a metaphorical description of the anatomy of healthy blood circulation, strongly hoping that in the reading process, the character's, the author's and the reader's hearts can equally become "part of the throbbing." In Flannery O'Connor's "Good Country People", Hulga's real and Manley Pointer's pretended medical ailments, their heart problems also become metaphorical: they suggest the characters' incapability for love or for trust, as if their hearts had a lid, which they could open and close at will. Carson McCullers often talks about the expansion of the heart (as a consequence of love, or of yearning for "the we of me"). Her novel's title would also deserve a more thorough interpretation: *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.* But she dedicates powerful passages to the literal description of the bodily organ as well, and, of course, not without symbolic undertones. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, when the narrator introduces the childhood traumas of Marvin Macy and his brother Henry, the following explanation can be read:

> But the hearts of small children are delicate organs. A cruel beginning in this world can twist them into curious shapes. The heart of a hurt child can shrink so that for ever afterward it is hard and pitted as the seed of a peach. Or again, the heart of such a child may fester and swell until it is a misery to carry within the body, easily chafed and hurt by the most ordinary things. This last is what happened to Henry Macey [...][8]

In connection with the heart as a symbol, it is not only the literal descriptions that I take into consideration, but in my essays, as well as in my book *Going Home Through Seven Paths to Nowhere*, I emphasize the importance of reading "by heart", when recognizing the intimate relationship between reader and text:

> [...] the words themselves become of special significance so much so that the *repetition* of reading becomes essential, thus a *familiarity* is achieved, which, in some manner, resembles a *familial* relationship: the text is (i.e. its words are)

[8] McCullers: *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, 36.

> accepted, welcomed in the reader's most private sphere. One feels an inclination to learn the text (or, depending on the length, of course, parts of it) *by heart*, thus the words become aphoristic, treasured, thrilling quotations, suitable for self-reassurance, self-control, or even self-expression. Such a *trust* in a special arrangement of words might make it possible for the reader to feel protected in the proximity of dangerous topics: the aesthetic power inherent in the words might 'convert', 'change', 'transform' the destructive power inherent in the topic. Thus the text, learned and taken by heart prevents the heart containing it from breaking or falling apart. The heart is a fragile organ. Keeping it in a vulnerable, throbbing balance by the experience of reading is one of the riskiest and most beautiful tasks.[9]

Although many years have passed since I wrote the above-quoted passage, I still maintain that this type of reading brings the texts alive, giving one's personal and intellectual life a constant pulsation.

7. Reflections on art

Questions of an aesthetic nature have already been touched upon in the former points – now, in the last part of this Conclusion, I wish to bring them into focus in connection with the essays presented in the volume. The references to art are not always obvious in the texts that I have examined, but they appear in the essays, although sometimes in a somewhat covert way. As I outlined in the Introduction, throughout my analyses, I have been focusing on the possibilities of surprise caused by sudden coincidences, connections between small details, gestures and motifs on three distinct levels: those of the fictive characters, the authors and the readers of the works, respectively. In most of my essays, I pay special attention to all the three levels, trying to find parallel motifs, "sudden sparks", celebrating *togetherness*: in spatial terms, unique meeting points, in temporal terms, unique moments. I hope to have shown that the three levels contain these parallels, that there is a deep connection between the linguistic formation, the special arrangement of words and the mode of approaching them in the process of reading. It is also a great source of aesthetic joy that the coincidental "sparks" have the power to preserve the otherwise often transient mystery, sometimes through references to visual art and to music.

The first text with a direct allusion to visual art is "A Still Moment" by Eudora Welty. Audubon's concerns bring up the question of the price of artistic preservation: is it necessary to "kill", i.e. to objectify the living reality in order to create a work of art that preserves life? In what way does the artist

[9] Katalin G. Kállay: *Going Home Through Seven Paths to Nowhere: Reading Short Stories by Hawthorne, Poe, Melville and James*, Budapest, Akadémiai Kiadó, 2003, 76.

become estranged from himself when preparing the painting to meet "a stranger's sight"? Welty's own doubts about the limits of art may be reverberated in the text:

> He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts; and that it would always meet with a stranger's sight, and never be one with the beauty of any other man's head in the world. As he had seen the bird most purely at its moment of death, in some fatal way, in his care for looking outward, he saw his long labor most revealingly at the point where it met its limit.[10]

This passage (already quoted in the second essay) also calls attention to the aesthetic dimensions of the word "almost", which I intend to elaborate in my future work. The limit of artistic representation implies that the creative process can never be seen as complete, it seems to be in the state of "almost" at best.

In Flannery O'Connor's "Parker's Back", the tattoo-image of the Byzantine Christ can also be interpreted as a sign of artistic incompleteness, especially when, at Parker's first glance at the artwork, the "all-demanding" eyes are still missing. Before the final, most important tattoo, Parker feels that his skin shows nothing more than a patchwork of botched images. However, before meeting his wife's absolute rejection, he has a sensation which I interpreted as a possible *moment of grace*: "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."[11] In my seventh essay, I experiment with visual effects to the extent of suggesting a visual imprint of a reading experience.

References to music are most prominent in the works of Carson McCullers. Although I refer to Mick's fascination with "MOTSART" already in the essay about *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and in the tenth essay, I mention the importance of musicality in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, music becomes one of the central elements of my interpretation in the last, comparative piece, where both Frances, the protagonist of McCullers's "Wunderkind" and Jacobi, the main character of Géza Ottlik's "Nothing's Lost" are musicians, they see the world through musical categories (e.g. childhood memories are in C-minor, whereas adult experiences are in A-major for Jacobi).

These allusions to other forms of art enrich the possibilities of aesthetic assumptions, waiting to be further elaborated on in the process of investigating and discovering more and more "sudden sparks", i.e. parallels, special moments and meeting points in literature and in my life.

[10] Welty: *A Still Moment*, 198.
[11] O'Connor: *Parker's Back*, 528.

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