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The Pattern of Diminishing Certitude in the Stories of Frank O'Connor

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IN A LITERATURE dominated by the absurd man, the little man, or the uprooted man, the impressive Irish contribution seems to be in proportion to centuries of historical experience. The Danes, the Normans and the English have all in their turn dominated Ireland. All too often the foreigner has been a superior organization man while the native Irish remained stubbornly, if often foolishly, independent. It is interesting to conjecture how far the Irish hatred for their foreign conquerors has paralleled their distrust for the abstract notions of conduct which they were forced to submit to. Certainly the major Irish authors of the twentieth century have professed a fierce loathing for abstract systems of thought, though it would seem as though they were inadvertently replacing foreign abstractions with active ones. Joyce opposed God, Mother, and Country; Yeats contemptuously denied the abstract intellect for bodily wisdom; Synge listened for the instinctive wisdom of tramps and fishermen. O'Connor belongs to this tradition, but he is more concerned with ordinary human conduct and its consequences than with a way of saying or perceiving. Consequently, O'Connor emphasizes the moral and social basis of the short story, that it represents “submerged population groups,” that its aim is to stimulate the moral imagination.

The characteristic shape of his short stories, what I call a pattern of diminishing certitude, enables O'Connor to focus on the antecedents and consequences of human action in a manner that is inherently dramatic. His stories suggest that human conduct can either brutalize or humanize the universe. The more his characters sacrifice humility, compassion and humor for rigid abstractions, the more inhumane and terrifying the effect. As the moral basis for action becomes increasingly abstract, as inhuman ideals begin to replace human realities, the more a character's sense of individual identity is contracted or destroyed. When the voice of man, however imperfect, can no longer be heard, then the world becomes a terrifying mechanism. The essential tragedy of Gogol's "Overcoat," O'Connor stressed in The Lonely Voice, is when men lose their natural
sympathy and can no longer hear or respond to the pathetic voice of Akekey Akakievich when he says, “I am your brother.” It is at this point that the universe becomes inimical to man. Where sympathy fails, so does human certainty and as a consequence of the resulting sense of isolation, man seems an insignificant speck of dust. Quite appropriately, O’Connor prefaced his study of the short story with Pascal’s reaction to a mechanical and unresponsive universe: “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces terrify me.” O’Connor’s recognition of the infinite spaces caused by action and judgment based on inhuman abstractions is the moral basis of the pattern of diminishing certitude. It is a pattern, as this study will demonstrate, which occurs quite early in his career in “Guests of a Nation” (1931) and persists with increasing depth and spontaneity through *Domestic Relations* (1957), his last collection.¹

From the very beginning of the title story of O’Connor’s first major collection, *Guests of a Nation* (1931), he juxtaposes two forms of contradictory behavior. One is instinctive and directly related to responses between man and man, the other is abstract and mechanical. Buonaparte, Noble, and the old woman cannot help but respond genially to the two Englishmen, Hawkins and Belcher. Both are good-natured individuals whose personal qualities and actions seem in no way foreign or antagonistic to their Irish captors, with the significant exception of Jeremiah Donovan. The old woman could hardly begrudge housing two prisoners of war when they seemed more like guests than enemies. Belcher, who later reveals a special affection for the hearth, gallantly helps with the chores. Though he isn’t much for conversation he is a good hand at cards. Hawkins talks too much to be a good card-player, but he has a superior knowledge of the country which is both embarrassing and flattering to his hosts. He also picked up a number of Irish dances, a compliment that could not be returned, “because our lads at that time did not dance foreign dances on principle.” Buonaparte is well aware of the ironies and the tragic implications of this statement which he makes at the very beginning of his narration. He has already evaluated the effects of the execution of Belcher and Hawkins on himself and knows that part of the blame lay in allowing all his humane

and instinctual responses to be violated for an abstract principle. Whatever common ground had been established by the Englishmen and their Irish counterparts had been sacrificed to some abstract code of retribution. Everything that Belcher and Hawkins do reiterates the voice of Gogol’s poor copying clerk, “I am your brother.” Every denial of sympathy and compassion for the sake of some vague, abstract code of justice or national honor creates those infinite and terrifying spaces.

The pattern of diminishing certitude emerges from every sacrifice of human sympathy to abstract principles. Looking back, Buonaparte realizes that his world was comprehensible as long as human action was scaled to human experiences. At the time he sees no reason why he and Noble should guard the Englishmen. They were in no way dangerous and they had no desire to escape. On the other hand, Jeremiah Donovan, Buonaparte’s immediate superior, is more inclined to regard them as prisoners of war. Donovan is typical of so many of O’Connor’s characters who fail to achieve a balanced perspective of themselves or others because of their rigidity or obsinacy. Unlike the other characters in the story, Donovan is repressed and anti-social. “He reddened when you talked to him, tilting from toe to heel and back, and looking down all the time at his big farmer’s feet.” The very qualities that Donovan is admired for, “he was a fair hand at documents,” indicate how much more foreign he is to his countrymen than Belcher or Hawkins. Completely insensitive to human nature, he permits Noble and Buonaparte to treat the Englishmen as guests rather than hostages. When Buonaparte discovers that they are to be executed, he is furious with Donovan for not warning him in the first place. Unfortunately, Buonaparte realizes that Donovan would never understand: “I couldn’t tell him, because I knew he wouldn’t understand. If it was only an old dog that was going to the vet’s, you’d try and not get too fond of him, but Jeremiah Donovan wasn’t a man that would ever be in danger of that” (p. 7).

Buonaparte’s sense of certainty diminishes as his estimation of what is reasonable or justified is swept aside by Donovan’s sense of duty. His bewilderment increases as the abstract notions of duty and retribution conflict with his personal affections. O’Connor very skillfully orchestrates the absurdity of beliefs that have no relation to human experience. The old
woman believes that the entire war started because, "the Italian Court stole the heathen divinity out of the temple in Japan." Noble believes in God and an afterlife but he is incapable of convincing Hawkins who is an atheist and a Marxist idealist. Hawkins maintains that the war is just another way that the capitalists, aided and abetted by the priests, preserve their power while keeping the people blind to injustice. Donovan believes in duty and with mechanical rigidity acts in accordance with his belief. By the end of the story, the murder of Belcher and Hawkins for duty's sake makes about as much sense as all the other beliefs, including the old woman's superstitious mutterings about hidden powers. Clearly, O'Connor is not particularly concerned with the claims of one belief over another, but with their effects on human conduct. What distinguishes Donovan from the rest of the characters is his inability to put aside artificial principles when they conflict with emotional sympathies. Even Donovan is vaguely aware of this conflict since the executions are performed in darkness with as little publicity as possible.

The final scene emphasizes Buonaparte's sense of tragic isolation and insignificance. Unlike Noble and the old woman he cannot pray. His reaction to the execution alters his moral universe. Buonaparte's sense of self diminishes as the terrifying spaces grow larger:

Noble says he saw everything ten times the size, as though there were nothing in the whole world but that little patch of bog with the two Englishmen stiffening into it, but with me it was as if the patch of bog where the Englishmen were was a million miles away, and even Noble and the old woman, mumbling behind me, and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow. And anything that happened me afterwards, I never felt the same about again (p. 16).

His loss of certitude is metaphorically emphasized by the allegorical darkness which envelops the entire episode. Ironically, Buonaparte's transition to maturity coincides with his perception of human frailty, that men are like lost children.

Ordinary life moves in its habitual way, just as the train moves on its tracks in "In the Train" (1938). Occasionally that ordinary existence is startled by some unknown force which changes us but leaves us no wiser. Our sense of the unknown is magnified as new doubts replace old certainties.
Again O'Connor sees that human experience follows a pattern of diminishing certitude and that much of what we do is surrounded by darkness. Appropriately darkness surrounds the train returning Helena, just recently acquitted for murdering her husband presumably for the sake of a younger man, and the witnesses for the defense and prosecution, to the small town of Farranchreesht. It was Moll Mohr's perjured evidence that won Helena the acquittal but there is no doubt about her guilt. With a cross section of rural Ireland gathered in one place, O'Connor offers us a mélange of conversations ranging from the individual appearances at the trial, to the present state of manners and medicine, to the social pretensions of the police sergeant's wife to the supposed magnificence of the old days. The usual concerns of everyday life seem to displace any overwhelming attention with the murder.

Outside, the dark night, suggestive of something unknown and mysterious, ominously engulfs the unwitting inhabitants of the train as well as those of the tiny cottages that the train rushes by: "And while they talked the train dragged across a dark plain, the heart of Ireland, and in the moonless night tiny cottage-windows blew past like sparks from a fire, and a pale simulacrum of the lighted carriages leaped and frolicked over hedges and fields" (p. 32). Sparks and pale lights suggest the transience and vulnerability of life. And the darkness between the sparks and surrounding the train suggests those terrifying spaces that isolate man. This isolation theme is reiterated inside the train by the drunkard who wanders from compartment to compartment looking for Helena. Ironically he has singled her out as an image of consolation for parting with his best friend, Michael O'Dwyer, though he had only caught a glimpse of her face for the first time on boarding the train. The description of Helena, isolated from the rest of the villagers except for Moll Mohr and bewildered as much by her acquittal as her crime, continues the pattern of isolation and vulnerability: "The carriage was cold, the night outside black and cheerless, and within her something had begun to contract that threatened the very spark of life in her" (p. 40). She tries to fan that spark by going over the feelings she had experienced when, upon her acquittal, she sensed a renewed contact with humanity. But the acquittal, a mere legal matter, does not prevent her growing sense of guilt and shame:
But now the memory had no warmth in her mind, and the something within her continued to contract, smothering her with loneliness, shame, and fear. She began to mutter crazily to herself. The train, now almost empty, was stopping at every little wayside station. Now and again a blast from the Atlantic pushed at it as though trying to capsize it (p. 41).

As the spark of life contracts, the universe grows more ominous and threatening. The experience of diminishing certitude accompanies Helena's bewilderment. She can lash out at the policemen who taunt her for having escaped the law, but she has no means of protecting herself against a passion that leaves her limp and helpless: "The flame of life had narrowed in her to a pin-point, and she could only wonder at the force that had caught her up, mastered her and then thrown her aside" (p. 44). Again, the universe seems a terrifying and incomprehensible machine while man seems small and insignificant.

Generally, O'Connor feels that instinctual or impulsive actions redeem human nature more than the sacrifice of impulse for some abstract or passionate extreme. Ned Keating's dream of sophisticated city life in "Uprooted" (1944), Larry Delaney's idealistic rebellion against conformity in "The Idealist" (1951) and Jim Piper's stubborn adherence to mastery and pride in "The Masculine Principle" (1951) are unnatural attempts to exchange imperfect human realities for some abstract notion of perfection. In part each of the above characters contribute to their own isolation and pain. But, unlike Buonaparte and Helena, they are not entirely mastered by forces beyond their control.

In "Uprooted" O'Connor uses two brothers to dramatize the strain and anguish caused by the unnatural pursuit of a way of life that violates one's natural impulses. Ned Keating is very contemptuous of his peasant background and, after years of struggling for an education, is now a teacher in Dublin. Nevertheless, he is dissatisfied, and dreams of worlds more suitable to his temperament. Ned's intense awareness of himself combined with the strain of his effort to separate himself from his past, makes him too wary of impulses beyond his control. "He did not drink, smoked little, and saw dangers and losses everywhere" (p. 75). When his fancy takes flight, when he thinks he would like to be a laborer in Glasgow or New York so that he would once and for all find out what all his ideals meant, he patiently and cautiously withdraws. In effect, Ned's
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desperate determination to free himself from his past now prevents him from opening himself up to whatever life offers: “And his nature would continue to contract about him, every ideal, every generous impulse another mesh to draw his head down tighter to his knees till in ten years’ time it would tie him hand and foot” (p. 76). One of the central ironies of the story is that Ned’s brother Tom, a priest, is much more alive to the instinctual life and much less concerned with abstract ideals. But because he’s a priest all his impulses to embrace life to the full are contracted. By the end of the story, Ned, who has always envied Tom’s superior education and training, realizes that he too is hunted down by his own nature. The qualities that Ned envies are those which Tom would like to overcome or eliminate. One hears the echo of Akekey Akakievich when O’Connor describes Tom as a man shouting to his comrades across a great distance.

The occasion for “Uprooted” is the decision by both brothers to visit their family for the Easter weekend. Back home nothing has changed. The Keating family and the peasants that live in this rural hamlet by the sea seem to live their lives according to an uninterrupted and unchanging rhythm. Whereas Ned is trying to discover a “scheme of life” in books or dreams of strange cities, these people are in no way alienated from themselves or their natural surroundings. Their awareness of life exists in the blood that runs through their veins, in the sea, in the constant drizzle and in the smell of salt and turf. Because these people have not been uprooted their lives flow from sea to blood to statement to action in one uninterrupted movement. Even Ned is impressed by the harmony between this way of life and the world which surrounds it: “It seemed to Ned that he was interrupting a conversation that had been going on since his last visit, and that the road outside and the sea beyond it, and every living thing that passed before them, formed a pantomime that was watched endlessly and passionately from the darkness of the little cottage” (p. 78).

Sea, turf, wind and rain are at the roots of the lives of these people and Ned, because of his ideals, and Tom, because of his orders, are both uprooted. The disparity between Ned and Tom’s way of life and that of the peasants is emphasized when Tomas, their father, takes them to Carriganassa, presumably to introduce Ned to Cait Deigan. Cait is not as outspoken as
her sister Delia who has been to Dublin and disparages the countryside. Ned is immediately attracted to Cait, but even then his reaction to her is more abstract than impulsive, as he finds himself murmuring, “Child of Light, thy limbs are burning through the veil that seems to hide them” (p. 89). Cait’s blushes illuminate the beauty and vitality of her nature. For a moment, when she shares her shawl with Ned to protect him from the rain as they cross the field to the boat that will take the Keatings home, Ned experiences a momentary release from his circumscribed life: “The rain was a mild, persistent drizzle and a strong wind was blowing. Everything had darkened and grown lonely and, with his head in the blinding folds of the shawl, which reeked of turf-smoke, Ned felt as if he had dropped out of Time’s pocket” (p. 91).

By the next morning the sense of exultation and release that Ned experienced the previous day is gone. Tom, who obviously was attracted to Cait, urges Ned to marry her. For the first time Ned realizes that Tom, in his own way, is as lonely and isolated as he. Though Ned abhors the idea of returning to teach rows of “pinched little city faces” in Dublin, he realizes that he cannot remain and marry Cait. Cait represents a way of life that is more attractive than he had ever realized, but he knows that he is no longer rooted in it. Outside his parents’ house Ned sees a boy on a horse all bathed in a magical light and realizes with more despair than ever what he had left behind:

He unbolted the half-door, went through the garden and out on to the road. There was a magical light on everything. A boy on a horse rose suddenly against the sky, a startling picture. Through the apple-green light over Carriganassa ran long streaks of crimson, so still they might have been enamelled. Magic, magic, magic! He saw it as in a children’s picture-book with all its colours intolerably bright; something he had outgrown and could never return to, while the world he aspired to was as remote and intangible as it had seemed even in the despair of youth (p. 96).

Both Ned and Tom suffer because by choice and chance they lead lives that contradict the laws of their own being. Unlike the peasants of Carriganassa they no longer live in a world that is an extension of their own natures. And, ironically, it is at the point where both recognize the loneliness of the other that they seem most like brothers.
If there is one general concern which can be recognized in the stories discussed above, it is O'Connor's concentration on the causes and effects of bewilderment and uncertainty. Ned Keating's sense of a past that could never be returned to and his anxiety about the future parallels O'Connor's own sense of loss and anxiety. In the preface to the Vintage paperback selection of his works, O'Connor wrote, "About the later stories, I am probably more in the dark than my readers will be." The later stories which O'Connor was referring to are probably best characterized by the title of his last collection in 1957, *Domestic Relations*. There is nothing extraordinary about the people, places and events within these stories. The subject matter, childhood, adolescence, parenthood—first confessions, rebellions at school, the experiences of love, hate, guilt, selfishness, suggest that our general conduct is more determined by experiences that are not particularly dramatic or unusual. O'Connor still uses a pattern of diminishing certitude, but his stories suggest that this is a more or less continuous process and not the result of a single experience. Like Ned in "Uprooted," the illumination of what is lost may come suddenly and much later in life, but the signs are everywhere. O'Connor's concentration in the forties and fifties on children bewildered by new experiences or by the ordinary changes in the maturation process, suggest that he was searching for an understanding of human conduct in the usual conditions of life. "My Oedipus Complex" (1952), "The Pretender" (1952), "The Genius" (1957), and "The Study of History" (1957) are only a few of the stories which reflect a broader application of the pattern of diminishing certitude, where the spaces that are created are sometimes terrifying, more often puzzling, and most frequently rationalized.

In "My Oedipus Complex," Larry, aged five, is confused and bewildered by his mother's new attitude toward him, now that his father has returned from the war. When Larry's mother shifts her attention from his father to the new baby then Larry's hostility toward him changes to sympathy and affection. In its humorous way the story suggests the early roots of sympathy in the recognition of a common problem. In this case Larry's own experience of rejection enables him to sympathize with his father. The intrusion of a foster child in the Murphy family in "The Pretender" is another case of alienated affection.
but the results are not as comforting. The Murphy children, especially Michael, have always taken their mother’s affection for granted. They do not understand why they have to share their mother’s affection with Denis Corby, a poor boy from the slums. The only way that they can rationalize the situation is to suspect that their mother is Denis’s. In an effort to resist change, to hold on to the world that they had already taken for granted, they either ignore Denis or are hostile to him. With consummate irony, O’Connor has Michael, the narrator, describe his relief when they are assured that Denis is not a member of the family: “His mother was a wrinkled old woman; the house was only a labourer’s cottage without even an upstairs room; you could see they were no class, and as I said to Susie on the way home, the fellow had a cool cheek to imagine we were his brother and sister” (p. 275). Though Denis is certain of his position, the reader can see how vulnerable it is.

The necessity for rationalizing the changes that occur to us, since it requires some form of accommodation to a set of circumstances that we are not familiar with, can be seen in “The Genius.” Here a rather precocious Larry refuses to acknowledge the fact that an older girl took a liking to him in school because he reminded her of her younger brother who had been killed in an accident. But in “The Study of History,” Larry Delaney is terrified by infinite possibilities, but especially the notion that he may have been another child in another family. His harmless game of imagining what he may have been had his mother married the wealthy Mr. Riordan or his father married May Cadogan, becomes a nightmare after he meets the real May and her son Gussie. How slight an alteration of circumstances would have threatened his present identity (he does not consider that his present identity would not have existed) terrifies him. While innocently imagining himself to be Gussie, now that he has a real model, he is suddenly terrified by the possibility and for a moment he loses grip of himself:

For the first time the charm did not work. I had ceased to be Gussie, all right, but somehow I had not become myself again, not any self that I knew. It was as though my own identity was a sort of sack I had to live in, and I had deliberately worked my way out of it, and now I couldn’t get back again because I had grown too big for it .... I tried to play a counting game; then I prayed, but even the prayer seemed different, as though it didn’t belong to me at all. I was away
in the middle of empty space, divorced from mother and home, and everything permanent and familiar (p. 34).

Like Buonaparte, in "Guests of the Nation," Larry's experience of infinite possibilities is accompanied by a terrifying loss of both certainty and identity.

O'Connor's short stories begin with the painful consequences of prejudices and principles inherited by a nation because of a combination of its past history and present ideals. From, as G. B. Saul put it, "history fictionalized" in "Guests of a Nation," he moves to individual histories and their consequences, such as in "In the Train," and "Uprooted." In the period since World War II, he explores the roots of individual conduct in domestic relations and principally in the attitudes and reactions of children. Like Larry Delaney in "The Study of History," O'Connor makes us aware of our uncertain position in a vague and at times terrifying universe. With the expansion of consciousness one becomes increasingly bewildered and isolated. Yet, ironically, it is this sense of isolation that is the shared experience of all humanity from childhood to old age. O'Connor's perception of this pattern of diminishing certitude is central to his aim of the short story as he conceived it, "to stimulate the moral imagination." From the moral child confused by passions and events, such as Helena and Buonaparte, he moves to the bewilderment experienced by real children. His profound understanding of the confusing circumstances surrounding our all too fragile existence is the source of the moral and humane perspective he has achieved. He does not assume a superior position to his characters. Though he is sympathetic, he is not sentimental. He admired Hemingway's short stories for their precise structure, but he could not appreciate his detachment. His own estimation of himself as a nineteenth century liberal and a nineteenth century realist again emphasizes the primacy of his moral perspective. But if we are to admire Frank O'Connor it will not be because of his good intentions, but because he was capable of echoing Akakey Akakievich's desperate cry, "I am your brother," into the twentieth century without sacrificing the demands of his art.