

Speaking in Tongues

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Flannery O'Connor has a tongue like a church. It is the sort of church that hides in the corner of a decaying neighborhood or, maybe, sits along the edge of a rural route. Its walls are wrapped in white paint, but the paint is flaking away. Bare wood shows through, and it too is splintering away. The foundation has shifted, so the cracks between the floorboards have widened into broad, black, wavering lines. Its steeple points slantingly, as if it were tired of pointing. Old folks say that any day now, it will fall. They have been saying it for years. But they still show up, every Sunday, to that crumbling home of communion. O'Connor, in her *Mystery and Manners*, speaks with a voice moved by the spirit of that same communion. Hers is a voice that calls its congregation to a crumbling structure—a voice that beckons the community through those church house doors, only, then, to order them out.

Discussing community in her essay “The Regional Writer,” O'Connor writes, “Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community” (53). Deftly, O'Connor—herself a novelist—here pours community as the foundation for her writing, for her voice. So, what community in particular comprises that concrete? As suggested by the title of the essay to which this excerpt belongs, O'Connor’s “communication” depends largely on “talking inside” her region, that region being the South. Although she directly anoints herself with Southernness by referring to the South as “our identity,” O'Connor expresses her gentlest, most powerful love for the South with her drawling, vernacular voice (57). In one particularly telling instance, she summarizes a lecture on the “specious dignity” of “being a Georgia author” by writing, “The moral of my talk on that occasion was that a pig is a pig, no matter who puts him up” (52). With her proverbial tone, her agrarian symbol of the “pig,” and her use of the Southern “put . . . up” instead of the more generally American ‘put away,’ O'Connor brings the sort of rhetorical structure, symbolism, and diction of the Southern vernacular to her writing. Drawing too on the religious quality of that Southern vernacular, she gives thanks to

her brothers and sisters: “It is a great blessing, perhaps the greatest blessing a writer can have, to find at home what others have to go elsewhere seeking” (54). In Southern language, O’Connor addresses the Southerner, not only as a woman who is Southern herself, but as one who is “blessed” to be so.

Just as she draws on Southern language in her writing, O’Connor pays attention to the South’s vernacular when she represents speech. While rendering her Southern neighbors, O’Connor depends on nonstandard spelling and syntax to transcribe the exchange of a Georgian grandfather and child as the latter asks, “‘Whut is thet thang?’” and the former responds, “‘I ain’t seen one of them since my granddaddy’s day. . . . Churren, . . . that’s the king of the birds’” (“King” 13). O’Connor does not here act as a sociologist, though; she, just like her neighbors, is Southern and speaks Southern too. When asked about that “king of the birds,” her apparently unmovable peacock, O’Connor quotes herself, “‘Nothing ails him. . . . He’ll put it up terreckly’” (11). She not only puts the peculiarly Southern sense of the word “directly” in her mouth, but she also writes it the way she says it: in Southern dialect. She doesn’t consider the South by peeking at it through a side window; she sits right down on the living room sofa.

But, then again, she doesn’t *write* in dialect. Certainly, her prose draws on Southern imagery, speech patterns, and even diction. But unlike the drawling voice her character uses, O’Connor’s authorial voice conforms to standardized English grammar and spelling. Although she *says* “‘terreckly,’” she’d *write* “‘directly.’” Here, another voice—educated in regionally nonspecific, academic American English—emerges alongside her Southern one and doesn’t seem to be too happy with itself, either. O’Connor addresses this tension as she notes that largely, during her college years, “nobody mentioned any good Southern writers to me,” adding, “As far as I knew, the heroes of Hawthorne and Melville and James and Crane and Hemingway were balanced on the Southern side by Br’er Rabbit” (“Regional” 55-6). O’Connor does not seem too perturbed by her standing in this decidedly non-Southern literary community, either. She suggests in another essay that all schoolchildren should learn literature via “the better English novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries” and then turn to “the best work of Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, the early James, and Crane” (“Total” 138). Since the former canon is clearly British and the latter is exclusively Northern, this literary community is certainly not Southern; O’Connor shifts her foundation away from Georgia’s red dirt. Her voice creaks like a house divided.

But there is a mortar that can mend those crumbling walls of brick—a language that unifies. Though sometimes hidden, it is a language seated deep

in the heart of things. “The Judaeo-Christian [sic] tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless,” O’Connor writes (“Believer” 155). Certainly, her language is “bound to” that tradition. Drawing from Jesus’s parable, she analyzes one of her short stories’ characters as inducing faith with a small “gesture, like the mustard-seed” (“Work” 113). Righteous human influence, no matter how small, will plant the seed of faith. Drawing on biblical figures of purifying flame, she describes believers who “purify” their “own religious notions” “in the heat of [their] unbelieving neighbor’s anguish” (“Believer” 160). Voices bewailing faith, no matter how loud, will strengthen the quiet faith of the believer. Drawing on King David’s urging to make a joyful noise and drawing on the unified, divine language that crumbled with the Tower of Babel, she “hears” her peacocks’ “chorus of jubilation begin: /*Lee-yon lee-yon, /Mee-yon mee-yon! /Eee-e-yoy eee-e-yoy! /Eee-e-yoy eee-e-yoy!*” (“King” 20-1). Language, no matter how obscure, can congregate many alienated sinners into one joyous multitude.

With her references to the Bible and Judeo-Christian theology, O’Connor writes in that one true language, the unifying tongue whose “tradition has formed . . . the west” (“Believer” 155). Like her own writing, her literary canon is “bound to” Christianity; she shows Joseph Conrad’s commonalities with St. Augustine in her “Novelist and Believer” and she refers to such simultaneously religious and literary figures as Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas throughout her essays.

Her South, too, is certainly religious. In one of her many indictments of the modern condition, O’Connor laments, “I don’t believe that our present society is one whose basic beliefs are religious, except in the South” (“Believer” 166). Here, though, some trouble arises. Although the vocalization of her faith has reconciled her voice’s warring tribes of Southernness and literariness, that faith now alienates her from the latter community. While her contemporary Southerners and her literary canon are enmeshed in a larger Christian community, her literary contemporaries are not. And O’Connor has something to say about it. The unifying aspect of her Christian voice dissipates when she addresses those contemporaries, “Hemingway and Kafka and Gide and Camus,” or, in her more colorful language, her “pagan colleagues” (“Believer” 161, 167).

With all her previous talk of the healing unction of community, O’Connor here flicks her tongue like a bullwhip, a new judgmental tone coloring her voice. Laying that lash across the backs of know-it-all modern students, O’Connor hyperbolizes, “Like the college student who wrote in her

paper on Lincoln that he went to the movies and got shot, many students go to college unaware that the world was not made yesterday” (“Total” 138). In this sentence, O’Connor is like a church lady out of church; after testifying from the altar to the power of community and the salt of the earth, she flits around from cafeteria table to cafeteria table whispering about so-and-so’s child—that college student that’s smart enough to make it rain but doesn’t have the sense to come in from out of it.

Keeping up her orneriness, O’Connor often drops arrestingly severe statements into her prose. In one instance, she reacts to a letter from a nun, who evocatively tells her of a recently departed, disfigured girl named Mary Ann. According to the nun, when alive, Mary Ann’s lone “eye sparkled, twinkled, danced” and her unwavering faith inspired the people around her to forget “her physical defect [and to recognize] only the beautiful brave spirit” (“Mary Ann” 214). The nun’s poignantly sentimental letter concludes, “Now Mary Ann’s story should be written but who to write it?” (214). In the wake of this touching plea, written by a woman who has devoted her life to O’Connor’s faith and about a girl who lived and died with it, O’Connor answers: “Not me.” In this arresting instance, the voice that emerges seems to be far from that of the woman who earnestly speaks with her Southern neighbor about a shared identity, the woman who graciously treasures her place within a venerated literary tradition, a woman whose Christian love for her neighbor is her lifeblood. In her sharp wit and in this violent moment of refusal, O’Connor is not particularly concerned with her brothers and sisters, at all.

She admits that, though. With her quick, negative response to her lengthy, emotional description of the nun’s written request, O’Connor characterizes herself as cold, unwilling to serve God and His children. The boldness of her rhetoric in this passage nearly decries O’Connor as a hypocrite, a woman whose words thrash against her other words. It is the voice of a sinner. But, through its candidness, it is also the voice of a sinner in confession.

In this moment, something happens to O’Connor. Looking disinterestedly at an enclosed photograph of the young girl, she finds herself “[continuing] to gaze at the picture long after [she has] thought to be finished with it” (215). She, apparently moved, opens a Hawthorne story, prompting her to reflect on yet another Hawthorne story. That brings to her mind an incident detailed in Hawthorne’s diary in which, visiting a children’s hospital ward, he is confronted and disgusted by a grotesquely disfigured child. Hawthorne admits that the child was so confidently intent on being embraced “and made much of, that it was impossible not to do it” (218). Looking further down the

page, O'Connor reads, "It was as if God had promised the child this favor on my behalf, and that I must needs fulfill the contract" (218). O'Connor, too, fulfills the contract between herself, Mary Ann, and God; she writes that book's introduction.

O'Connor's route to this selfless honorarium—this righteous act—is not of her own planning. She first says, after all, "Not me." She inexplicably continues to look at Mary Ann's picture although she thinks that she is "finished with it." Flannery O'Connor's righteousness does not spring from Flannery O'Connor. Drawn to the picture of Mary Ann against her own will, writing the introduction to that little girl's story against her will, too, O'Connor finds herself possessed by another, greater will. In another essay, O'Connor, again bewailing the manifold blindnesses of modern society, writes, "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" ("Work" 112). In that it initiates a narrative bound for righteous action, O'Connor's sharp refusal of "Not me" is one of those "violences." In that the greater will that possesses her is unnamed and unexplained, its intrusion into her life is indeed one of those "almost imperceptible intrusions." For all its internal tensions, her voice somehow manages to utter a narrative that resolves those tensions. That voice, though, does not speak of itself, but of another, one who doeth the works.

But why, if her voice is fraught with contradiction, and she seems to know it, does O'Connor write with that voice? If it is taut with tensions that can be loosed, why does she use it in the first place? Perhaps it is because, like her reader, Flannery O'Connor is human; she is confused. By her own knowledge, she doesn't know exactly what or who she is or where she belongs. But it is from these points of confusion that Flannery O'Connor's voice, her identity, emerges. From the tensions between her Southern vernacular and her standardized literary languages, and her simultaneous occupation of their separate communities, it becomes clear that O'Connor's voice is *defined by her struggles, insofar as they indicate her central human concerns*; she is concerned with community, the South, populism, the vernacular, the religious, speech, literature, tradition, propriety, secularism, alienation, arrogance, blindness, human frailty, the local, the eternal, the essential, judgment, empathy, sin and, like a drop of water on a scorched tongue, grace. Yes, she is Southern, and, yes, she is literary; all the contradictions be damned. (She is concerned with contradiction as well.)

Damned though they may be, those contradictions are still in that voice, groaning like the walls of a weakened house. Despite her thorough discussion

of and able attempts at unifying Southernness and literariness, though her mind is brilliant, she cannot offer a perfect reconciliation. “The virtues of art,” she offers, “like the virtues of faith, are such that they reach beyond the limitations of the intellect, beyond any mere theory that a writer may entertain” (“Believer” 158). Indeed, O’Connor’s “mere theory” is unable to tie her conclusively to a community. Too, “the limitations of the intellect” have left her incapable of reconciling her own voice. But something reaches “beyond.” In her voice, and in her art, there is something more than four creaking walls.

When those walls crumble under the critical eye, when the warped floorboards of her language are pulled up and the shifting foundation of her community shifts too far, when that divided house falls, there remains a Home within. It is found in the language that runs through all of her work, that of the prophets and of the Savior. It is found in the “imperceptible [intrusion]” that salves her blistered tongue, which, itself, can blister the ears of others for the sake of righteousness. That Home, free of shifting foundations and creaking walls, is found in the beginning, and so is it found in the end.

WORKS CITED

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- “On Her Own Work.” 107-18.
- “Total Effect and the Eighth Grade.” 135-40.
- “Novelist and Believer.” 154-68.
- “Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*.” 213-28.