

**THE POWER OF THE IRRATIONAL  
IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S  
THE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY**

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*«From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of  
heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away».*

(Matthew 11:12)

The title of Flannery O'Connor's novel, taken from the above Biblical quotation, tells the reader in advance that the main subject of the book is going to be the victory of the violent, who manage to carry off the kingdom of heaven. Usually, the word «violent» has a negative meaning. However, in this case we have to deal with this expression taking into account the Biblical context in which it is used. Thus, we can guess that this term refers to those who do not resign themselves to the empty existence of the rest and behave in an «irrational» and «violent» way because God has chosen them to prophesy the coming of the Messiah. This Biblical violence also becomes the center of O'Connor's novel. As she wrote in one of her letters, «the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence or not at all»<sup>1</sup>.

From the very beginning of the book the prophetic role of Mason Tarwater, who has just died, is clearly stated: «He had been called in his early youth and had set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Saviour»<sup>2</sup>. He believed that the modern world in which he lived was a fallen world which —had lost its faith in God. Because of that, he had been called by God to announce the Second Coming of the Messiah and the Day. of Judgement. The son of his niece, Francis Marion Tarwater, who was around fourteen, had been raised by Mason away from the corruption represented by city life in order that he should take part in this prophetic mission, too. This belief in the perversity of the world, the fall of humankind and the need for redemption is a recurrent image which plays a very important role in O'Connor's novels (*The Violent Bear It Away* and *Wise Blood*) and in most of her short stories, such as «A Good Man is Hard to Find», «A View of the Woods» or «A Cir-

<sup>1</sup> *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> Flannery O'CONNOR, *The Violent Bear It Away*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 5.

cle in the Fire». As Jill Baumgaertner has noted, «O'Connor always pushes us back to the agonizing scandal of the cross. That scandal has at its heart the recognition that humanity is fallen and needs redemption. Perhaps, because the South still smarts from its own fall in the War Between the States redemption has a special meaning (Confederate Memorial Day is still a state holiday in Georgia). With defeat comes the realization that humanity alone cannot save itself, humanity alone cannot perfect itself, humanity alone is vulnerable and weak»<sup>3</sup>.

The references to the prophetic role of the Tarwaters are closely linked to one important element: fire. In the novel fire appears mainly as a useful way of punishment, correction and purification. Thus, we learn that the old man was corrected with fire by the Lord. Besides, there are many references to the impending destruction of the world by fire. E.g.: «He proclaimed from the midst of his fury that the world would see the sun burst in blood and fire»<sup>4</sup> This idea has clear Biblical reminiscences: according to John the Baptist, Jesus will baptize men with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 2:11).

Later on, old Tarwater will insist on the imminent arrival of a prophet sent by the Lord with fire in his hand. Finally, we can also see that fire is used as a way of punishment against those who try to prevent the rising of new prophets. Thus, we learn that Mason used fire against his nephew (he shot him with his gun) when he tried to take the child back to civilization.

Another element which plays an important role in this prophetic mission is water. Thus, Tarwater is told by his great-uncle that his first mission will be to baptize the dim-witted child of Rayber, the old man's nephew and Francis Tarwater's uncle. Even the surname of both prophets (Tarwater) seems to remind us of the importance of water in this novel. In fact, throughout the whole novel we can find references to water and actions related to it, with an special emphasis on baptism and drowning.

Francis Tarwater's doubts about his life as a prophet are suddenly increased after his great-uncle's death. There is a new voice inside him (the stranger), which begins to raise strong objections to everything he has learned from Mason. So, he focuses his attention on the weaknesses of his great-uncle: «When he couldn't stand the Lord one instant longer, he got drunk, prophet or no prophet. Hah. He might say it would hurt you but what he meant was you might get so much you wouldn't be in no fit condition to bury him»<sup>5</sup>. This stranger also shows him the futility of his prophetic mission and the uselessness of burying the dead and baptism. For instance, he emphasizes the fact that baptism has had no influence in Rayber's life. According to the stranger, all these beliefs are just the result of Mason's

<sup>3</sup> Jill P. BAUMGAERTNER, *Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring* (Wheaton: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1988), p. 13.

<sup>4</sup>*The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup>*The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 45.

madness. Because of that, the stranger offers Tarwater the temptation of breaking with the past, which would be symbolised by the act of burning Mason's corpse (against the old man's wishes), and beginning a new life with his uncle in the city. This tempter's behavior is very similar to the one of the devil, though he denies his existence:

«You can do one thing or you can do the opposite.  
Jesus or the devil, the boy said.  
No no no, the stranger said, there ain't  
no such thing as a devil...  
It ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or you»<sup>6</sup>.

Related to this, it is also worth mentioning the fact that, according to Mason, the devil has played a very important role in Tarwater's birth (his mother was a whore and he is, in fact, a bastard). So, it would be no wonder that the devil tried to influence the boy once again.

At last, Tarwater, under the influence of whiskey, yields to the temptations of the stranger and begins a new journey in search of truth towards the city, which he had formerly considered to be an evil place. In fact, he had been there once and had been repelled by the lack of sense of city life. It had been the first time that he had left his backwoods shelter and faced another way of living. We can say that this experience meant the loss of his innocence, clearly symbolized by the loss of his hat.

Although Tarwater believes that he has succeeded in breaking with the past by burning his great-uncle's corpse (fire is associated again with destruction and purification), we, the readers, already know that he is wrong, because from the very beginning of the novel we are told that he has been buried by a Negro. This fact makes us suspect that the influence of the old man is still present in Tarwater, though he denies it.

The city will provide Tarwater with a wide range of temptations. Thus, he is tempted by the world of business and work, whose main representative is Meeks, the salesman : «Meeks told him to learn to work every machine he saw. The greatest invention of man, he said, was the wheel and he asked Tarwater if he had ever thought how things were before it was a wheel...»<sup>7</sup> However, the main temptation which lies before the eyes of Tarwater is the possibility of beginning a new life under the protection and care of Rayber, the school-teacher, who seems to stand for the power of reason and learning and whose physical deafness seems to be also spiritual : «Listen you people», she shrieked, «I see a damned soul before my eye! I see a dead man Jesus hasn't raised. His head is in the window but his ear is deaf to the Holy Word!»<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>6</sup> *The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> *The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 83.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134.

There is a clash between the new city influences and the old prophetic feelings, which are still at work. Tarwater tries to resist the pressure of such opposed forces by defending his own identity. On the one hand, with the help of the stranger, fights against his obsession with baptizing Bishop (the dim-witted son of Rayber), who reminds him constantly of his great-uncle and his prophetic mission. On the other hand, he resists Rayber's attempts to change his mind and turn him a civilized and rational boy. Related to this, it is also worth quoting O'Connor's own words about this particular point: «I wanted to get across the fact that the great-uncle (Old Tarwater) is the Christian—a sort of crypto-Catholic—and that the school-teacher (Rayber) is the typical modern man. The boy (young Tarwater) has to choose which one, which way, he wants to follow. It's a matter of vocation»<sup>9</sup>.

With reference to the relationship between Rayber and Tarwater, we must also pay attention to the fact that the boy always seems to despise the school-teacher because he is only a man of words, and not a man of action like himself: «I never came for no school lesson», the boy said rudely...I know what I think when I do it and when I get ready to do it, I don't talk no words. I do it»<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, we also notice that Rayber is not so different from Tarwater because there is also an irrational, ignorant, backwoods and violent part in his personality, which he has inherited from old Tarwater too (the school-teacher was also under his influence when he was a boy). His irrational love towards Bishop would be an external representation of this violent self: «It was love without reason, love for something futureless, love that appeared to exist only to be itself...And it only began with Bishop and then like an avalanche covered everything his reason hated»<sup>11</sup>. Besides, Rayber, like Tarwater, regards himself as a chosen man because he believes that he is the only one who can save the boy from irrationality. Nevertheless, he gradually considers him to be an oppressing factor and a threat. In fact, Tarwater will destroy Rayber's emotional stability by drowning Bishop, who was a basic element in his life: «He had known by that time that his own stability depended on the little boy's presence. He could control his terrifying love as long as it had its focus in Bishop, but if anything happened to the child, he would have to face it in itself... he would have to resist feeling anything at all, thinking anything at all»<sup>12</sup>.

Once the drowning has taken place, Tarwater feels that he is able to begin a new life at home because he has showed himself that he is not a

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<sup>9</sup> As reported by Joel Wells, «Off the Cuff», *The Critic*, 21 (August-September 1962), 4-5. Reprinted in *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), p.88.

<sup>10</sup> *The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 171.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>12</sup> *The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 182.

prophet. Although he has said the actual words of baptism, he, as usual, denies the importance of these words by emphasizing the action, the drowning. We can also see that Tarwater no longer regards himself a boy, but a grown man who can get rid of his fate because he has broken with his old beliefs : «it was apparent to him that since his great-uncle's death , he had lived the lifetime of a man. It was as no boy that he returned...He had saved himself forever from the fate he had envisioned»<sup>13</sup>. Now, on his way home, he is proud of himself because he knows as much as Rayber and besides, he can act. However, we notice that this self-achievement is only an illusion because he continues suffering: food cannot stop his hunger, which has troubled him since his arrival to the city, and water cannot put an end to his thirst.

Just when Tarwater begins to be in a sad plight (hungry, thirsty and lonesome), temptations appear again. This time they are two material temptations, two vices (smoking and drinking), which are offered to him by a stranger in a car, who inevitably reminds us of the former stranger. Unlike Jesus in the desert, Tarwater yields to the temptations and because of that, like Adam and Eve, he is punished. The stranger rapes him and takes away his two dearest possessions: the hat (a symbol of Mason's influence) and the bottle-opener (a symbol of Rayber's influence). This tragic event is the turning-point which makes Tarwater aware that he must follow his fate. Violence, that is, irrationality, turns to be the only way of setting him in the right direction. As Frederick Buechner has observed, «it is often through such outlandish means as these that we are to be saved if we are to be saved at all, and opposed to our saving is all the madness and perversity not only of the world we inhabit but of the worlds we carry around inside our skins, that inhabit us»<sup>14</sup>.

The rape provokes Tarwater's anger and he sets fire to the place in order to purify it: «Then he tore off a pine branch and set it on fire and began to fire all the bushes around the spot until the fire was eating greedily at the evil ground, burning every the spot the stranger could have touched»<sup>15</sup>. Shortly after, he will use fire again to get rid of the first stranger, his additional voice, who tries to convince him of their success in vain. Again, fire appears as a way of destruction and purification.

«The human being hears, refuses to listen, persists in his own ways, attempts to escape, and is finally struck down by his conceit, which proves to have been working in the cause it has resisted»<sup>16</sup>. Violence, conflict, resistance and suffering become fundamental steps in the way towards

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 220.

<sup>14</sup> *Flannery O'Connor: A Proper Scaring* (Foreword by Frederick Buechner), p. IX-X.

<sup>15</sup> *The Violent Bear It Away*, p. 232.

<sup>16</sup> Louise Y. Gosset, *The History of Southern Literature*, ed. Louis D. Rubin Jr. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Library, 1985), p.490.

revelation. Tarwater's resistance has made him know the enormous strength of his prophetic role. Probably if he had not fought against his destiny, he would have never been sure of having chosen the right way. The final revelation that he has failed to burn his great-uncle's corpse makes him realise that nothing on earth can fill his hunger, only «the bread of life». Then, he decides to leave his violent and irrational country of chosen men and set off to fulfill the Lord's command: «GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY».