Outer Marks, Inner Grace: Flannery O'Connor's Tattooed Christ

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AMONG the many remaindered and unusual titles in a Marboro booklist, Flannery O'Connor once found an item that has not exactly left its mark in publishing history—*Memoirs of a Tattooist*, by George Burchett.[1] Perhaps it was O'Connor's special eye for the bizarre and primly taboo which led her to buy the book, which she then used for factual reference while composing her short story, " Parker's Back," but this unusual interest in tattoos has roots in a much wider garden than that of just her own fertile mind. She was attracted to the tattoo in the same way that people of other centuries and cultures have been attracted.

In this paper I propose to relate O'Connor's fascination with the tattoo to its worldwide context, and show how in her individualistic way she transformed this fascination into a work of literature. To appreciate her accomplishment better, it will be helpful for us to see first how tattoos have been used by a well-known Japanese writer, then how they have been used in Japan and other countries historically, and finally how O'Connor incorporated these usages in her short story.

O'Connor's religious outlook on life and literature often led her outside mainstream Christian Biblical sources to materials which can be more generally associated with folk religions. For example, in *The Violent Bear It Away* she treats Tarwater's dilemma (head *vs.* heart, or belief *vs.* unbelief) in images and patterns which go back to earlier societies and their shamanic initiations. In " The Displaced Person " she was led by her intuition to restore religious symbolism to the peacock, which for centuries in Western literature had appeared merely as a symbol of pride or bad luck. In " Greenleaf " she makes use of the bull and the myth of Dionysus to indicate a spiritual relevation

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and embrace.[2]

A practicing Christian, O'Connor felt that her faith was a natural part of her vision and writing. She said that religious belief gave the novelist a respect for mystery and that such a novelist is only interested in the surface of things inasmuch as he can go through them to the mystery which lies beyond (see O'Connor 1969: 41). Accordingly, in her stories O'Connor attempted to reveal the mystery of existence through the everyday doings of her characters, just as, in Catholic belief, sacraments such as Baptism are " visible signs of an invisible grace."

If such explicit religious language is distracting in the context of literature, then a brief look at a Japanese writer, Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, might be in order, for he had a similar philosophy of fiction, and his first published work was a story about the effect a tattoo has on its wearer.

THIS STORY is called " The Tattooer " (1910), and can be summarized as follows. Seikichi, a famous tattooer, enjoys giving pain while creating his works of art on human flesh. For years he longs to find a beautiful woman upon whom he can work his masterpiece. Then one day he recognizes his desired beauty by her foot, which is protruding from a litter as it passes by. A half-year later the girl appears at his door on an errand. Seikichi tells her of his search and shows her two pictures, one called " The Victim." In both pictures a beautiful woman is looking upon the man or men she has subjected to torture and death. Seikichi tells the teenaged girl that such a woman is inside her; a shudder of recognition passes through the girl. The tattooer bids her to stay so that he can make her a true beauty, an unattainable ideal beauty. He drugs the girl and works all night to tattoo a huge sprawling black-widow spider on her back. The girl wakes, bathes to bring out the colors, and returns to the artist as a cruel woman, conscious of her beauty and her power over men; she tells Seikichi that he is her first victim. The story ends with the girl showing her tattoo to the artist: " Just then her respendidly tattooed back caught a ray of sunlight and the spider was wreathed in flames " (Tanizaki 1967: 169).

The tattooist, by his art, has been able to bring out the true nature of the girl. Before receiving the tattoo she had only vague perceptions and fears about herself, but afterwards she is strong in her beauty. The story shows Tanizaki's themes of pleasure and pain, of beauty and cruel strength. It also shows his notion of the power of art. According to Makoto Ueda, " In Tanizaki's view, then, a work of art presents truths that, because they are hidden under the surface of ordinary life, can be grasped only by the creative imagination " (Ueda 1976: 57).

Later Ueda gives a more complete explanation in language similar to that of Flannery O'Connor:

> External nature, however beautiful it might be, did not interest him. His concern was with internal nature, with human nature and all that it hides—with the " deep well " that looms darkly in the heart of each man. To Tanizaki, then, imitation of nature came to mean imaginative representation of these mysterious psychological forces as they manifest themselves in life. The artist, with his imaginative power, perceives the forces and creates a self-contained world in which they are given free rein. In Tanizaki's view, this world was truer to reality than the real one, for it brought the hidden potential of men and women to fulfillment (Ueda 1976: 60).

IN " Parker's Back," the tattoo of a face of Christ brings about a change in the hero Obadiah Elihue Parker and he realizes his potentiality as a person created and graced by God. In general " Parker's Back " is more complicated than " The Tattooer " because of a long flashback at the beginning of the story which describes Parker wooing and marrying Sarah Ruth, and because within this flashback there is another, which tells about Parker's collection of tattoos from the first when he was fourteen till the present, some months after his marriage.

Basically Parker has himself tattooed to alleviate a dissatisfaction about himself. He is searching for fulfillment, for a basic order and design for his life. Presently only his back is without a tattoo, and Parker is trying to think of one that will please his grim, Bible-reading wife. One day, driving a tractor in a field, he is knocked down by a tree limb and he gets the idea of having a picture of God tattooed on his back. He goes to the city and after two nights away from home, he returns to Sarah Ruth with the face of Christ on his back. When he whispers his own name at the door, the rising sun shines on him, and he feels that all the disorder of his life has now become one harmonious design. Despite the great difference that the tattoo has made in Parker's life, Sarah Ruth drives him out of the house because she does not accept God in visual form.

Whereas Tanizaki places his story within a long popular tradition of tattooing, *ukiyoe* woodblock prints and Kabuki drama, O'Connor incorporates the more universal experience of tattooing to point out the change that has come over Parker. The book which O'Connor used for background information, *Memoirs of a Tattooist*, is mainly a tale of George Burchett's adventures and associations with the royalty and other famous clients. At times the book deals with the social theories, meaning and history of tattooing, but O'Connor seems to have been impressed more by the spirit of the book than by its details. She

underlined only one detail in the book, and that concerned the anaesthetic used, ethyl chloride (Burchett 1958: 66), but she nevertheless grasped Burchett's feeling for the tattoo as art and by a kind of collective unconsciousness she drew upon the whole history of tattooing with its various types and motivations to deliver one of her basic themes: it is natural for human beings to engage in a religious quest.

The three main purposes for wearing tattoos can be found as early as a work called in Japanese *Gishiwajinden* 魏志倭人傳, written in China and not in Japan but which gives the first written reference to Japanese tattooing. The text reads:

> All the men to a greater or lesser extent have tattoos over their faces and bodies. From ancient times their ambassadors (they call themselves "Daifu," or minister) have come to China. A son of Shokoo, the Queen of Ka, was given Kaikei as a feudal possession. He warded off dangers from the rain dragon by cutting his hair short and wearing tattoos. (The present fishermen of Japan like to dive for shellfish and other kinds of fish so they tattoo themselves to scare away waterfowl and large fish.) Later on, tattoos began to be worn for ornamentation. Tattoo patterns vary according to the districts: some tattoos are placed on the right, some on the left; some are large, some small; and some are according to whether one is high or low in status, making a class distinction. This country is east of Tooya and Kaikei.[3]

In summary, the three reasons the ancient Japanese wore tattoos are (1) religious and totemic (to ward off dangers from the spirits); (2) occupational (to serve as a sign of their business and to scare away predators), and (3) personal (to beautify themselves).

Of first importance is the religious or totemistic motive. By putting on a picture of a particular animal or hero, the wearer comes under the influence of that protective spirit, partakes of its particular qualities, and is entitled to special supernatural help. Apart from this totemic influence, by the very fact of wearing a tattoo, the tattooed are marked as different, as special people. Such a situation parallels the sense of the sacred, which is something set aside from ordinary profane use. In later centuries, however, being set aside also meant being branded as a criminal for punishment, ostracism, and as a warning to others. In Japan this outcast tradition merged with that of the laborers during the Edo period (1600–1868), so that today tattooing survives as the mark of certain groups such as firemen, construction workers and the *yakuza* ("gangsters").[4]

Like the Japanese fishermen, western sailors sixteen centuries later adopted the practice of cultivating tattoos for their protection as well as for recording the places they had visited. This practice began,

however, only after Captain Cook had returned from the South Seas in the company of Omai, the splendidly tattooed Maori chief. It was from this time that the Polynesian word " tatau " (tattoo) came into the English language.[5] As the custom developed, sailors often chose a religious design such as " The Last Supper," or " The Crucifixion " for their backs. In view of the physical discipline at sea, they seemed to think that they would be flogged less often or less severely if the image of Christ would have to absorb the blows. According to Herman Melville in *White Jacket*, some sailors also had the belief that their tattoos would keep sharks from eating them if they should happen to fall overboard.[6]

The remaining motives for acquiring tattoos can be more briefly mentioned. In some societies the pain involved in getting a tattoo becomes a kind of initiation rite into a particular group or into adulthood. In other societies the designs give the wearer a feeling of personal worth. For example, Richie states that among the Japanese, tattoos are put on first to please the wearer (Richie 1980: 76). In addition, some men feel that the tattoos make them more attractive to women.

THOUGH the above reasons for getting tattoos vary throughout cultures and centuries, most of them appear in the story " Parker's Back." The story viewed from the aspect of Parker's experience with tattoos, i.e., his first interest in tattoos; his gradual collection, especially while he was in the navy; reasons; and finally the religious motif, demonstrates how O'Connor can take a secular practice and through it give a hint of the sacred dimension in the lives of human beings.

When the story opens, Parker is twenty-eight years old. Fourteen years earlier he had had his first spiritual insight when he saw a fully tattooed man at a fair. He noticed how the designs all fit together and how some of them moved and seemed alive when the man flexed his muscles. For the first time Parker sensed something of the mystery and wonder inherent in human beings. Until he had seen the tattooed man, " it did not enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed " (O'Connor 1965: 223). Afterwards Parker began searching for meaning and order in his life; in the search he is guided by his feeling of unease.

Parker tries to calm this unease by acquiring tattoos. When he is fifteen Parker gets his first tattoo—an eagle and cannon combination which is put on his hand. This particular design belongs to the group of patriotic and military patterns favored by tattoo enthusiasts. Besides being America's national bird, the eagle is noted for its symbolic qualities of " bravery, nobility, sensory keenness, steadfastness " (Richie

1980: 37). Parker's second design is his mother's name on a heart. Apart from the fact that this was the only design that she was willing to pay for, this mother-motif runs high among the tattoo designs chosen by Americans.

A characteristic of American and Western tattooing in general is that the designs are arranged haphazardly without a thought for the total effect. They are chosen because of what they represent symbolically or because of their association with a particular place, a kind of permanent souvenir. Parker has tattoos from Japan, Burma, " Everywhere he went he picked up more tattoos " (p. 514). In the Orient, however, and principally in Japan, the tattooer's aim is to provide a whole body design. If only one section of the body is tattooed, an upper arm for instance, the Japanese tattooer does not use the word of the customer " ***katate-bori*** meaning a single-arm design," but rather " ***katate-ochi*** (single-arm omission), indicating that it is only a partial design and that, in his opinion, the only real design is the complete one " (Richie 1980: 88–89; cf. also p. 53; cf. Scutt and Gotch 1974: 43–44). R.W.B. Scutt's observations about Western tattoos are very appropriate for describing Parker's situation: " . . . occasionally a tattooee is so fervently imbued with the obsession to acquire yet more and more designs that space available is reduced to such a degree that he finally decides to have the remainder tattooed. Then and only then, usually too late to achieve the miracle, is thought applied to binding the whole mess together " (Scutt and Gotch 1974: 124). Parker does " achieve the miracle," but it happens at a far deeper level of his being than he had anticipated or Scutt means to suggest.

Parker's obsessive craze for tattoos results in a wide variety of designs which fall into the categories of Fellowes' sketchbook. O'Connor undoubtedly got many ideas from the quasi-sketchbook of Burchett's memoirs but she devised Parker's collection on her own. Some of the designs Burchett mentions are religious designs like the " Last Supper," or the " Crucifixion " (Burchett 1958: 75); " dragons, snakes, birds and leaping tigers " on a Malayan ruler's arms (p. 181); and Chinese dragons up and down a British official's body. These dragons saved the official's life because the natives who stripped him for human sacrifice saw the dragons and thought he belonged to the demons (p. 107). A photograph opposite page forty-nine in the memoirs shows an eagle and dragon fighting on the back shoulders.

An enumerated list of designs on one body can be found in W. D. Hambly, quoting the figures of A. W. Franks, who described the tattooed man of Burma in 1872. The man's body was completely covered with designs which were joined with " innumerable little red and blue

characters" (Burmese script). The breakdown of the 388 designs on the body is as follows:

Breast as far as the waist	50
Left arm	51
Right arm	50
Back from neck to waist	37
Neck and throat	8
Lower part of the body	53
Lower extremities	137
Figures on forehead	2

The designs included snakes, elephants, swans, two crowned sphinxes, eagles, cats, tigers, storks, crocodiles, salamanders, dragons, fishes, gazelles, women with dresses, fruit, leaves, flowers . . . (Hambly 1925: 274).

Such a full-clad tattooed person was the man Parker saw at the fair. The man seemed to be dressed in a "single intricate design of brilliant color" (p. 512), and when he moved "the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own" (p. 513). The sight fills Parker with awe and he begins to consider the fact of his own existence. This reaction fits Marcia Tucker's remark that "The marking of the body is often the human being's first expression of the awareness of individuality" (Tucker 1976: 3). After his first tattoo Parker collects them over the years until his body is covered except for his back (Parker does not want a tattoo where he cannot see it). Among his designs are the following, none of which satisfies him for very long:

Place	*Designs*
hand	eagle perched on a cannon
arms	serpent coiled about a shield; hearts, some with arrows and one with the name of his mother; spread hand of cards; Buddha
shoulders	tiger and panther
chest	cobra around torch
stomach	Elizabeth II
liver	Philip (Burchett mentions that the wedding of Princess Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh brought him new business. He also tattooed the portrait of Princess Margaret.)
abdomen	obscenities
thighs	hawks
knees	peacocks
(unknown)	anchors and crossed rifles (Parker had several military designs before he started with designs of living beings

such as animals and people.)

Parker tried to imitate the man at the fair but the effect of all his designs is " not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched " (p. 514). Parker, like many American and European sailors, has picked up a tattoo here and there, and the result is, in Scutt's designation, " Kitsch " (Scutt and Gotch 1974: 121).

Parker's motives for acquiring tattoos are many, almost as many as the fourteen listed by Scutt (p. 13), then later reduced to three: " Superstition, status, and attraction " (Scutt and Gotch 1974: 63). First there is Parker's burgeoning awareness of himself as a person. On one level he is indulging in narcissism; on another he is moving in a religious direction in praise of God. That a delight in one's body can lead to praise of God is attested even by Scripture, Psalm 138 (139), 13–14: " Truly you have formed my inmost being; you knit me in my mother's womb. I give you thanks that I am fearfully, wonderfully made."

SECOND, Parker's dissatisfaction with each tattoo individually and the collection as a whole represents his feeling of lack, a sense of something missing. He is looking for a center to pull his life together and give it shape and meaning. He is drawn toward the picture of Christ by this continual acceptance and rejection of possibilities and by following his impulses. In " The King of the Birds," O'Connor wrote that a feeling of lack led her on a search through various types of fowl until she rested satisfied in the purchase of a pair of peafowl.

It would seem then that O'Connor's own experience in the matter of the peacocks helped her to understand Parker's gradual convergence on Christ. Kathleen Feeley's comparison is apt: " Her mysterious attraction to strange birds that led finally to her acquisition of peacocks seems analogous to Parker's mysterious attraction to tattoos that finally led to his total absorption in Christ " (Feeley 1972: 149). However, since at the end of the story there seems to be no conscious acceptance of Christ on the part of Parker, it is the reader who sees where Parker's search has symbolically led him. Thus the story is an exemplum rather than a tale of conversion.

A third reason for wearing tattoos is personal attraction. Parker is amazed when his tattoos fail to win Sarah Ruth's admiration—they had always pleased other girls, especially when he promised to show them the hidden ones. Even after he marries Sarah Ruth, he insists on telling her what his " beautiful " boss had said the first time she saw him shirtless: " ' Mr. Parker . . . you're a walking panner-ram-

mer!' " (p. 519). Parker failed, though, to catch the old lady's irony.

Finally, there is an implicit religious reason couched in totemism. The last picture that Parker has so painstakingly applied to his back (he wants all the squares of the mosaic picture faithfully transferred) is the culmination of his previous fourteen years of searching and endurance. Until the final picture Parker's restless soul did indeed seem to be influenced by the totemic animals on his skin. Their wild nature had entered him: " It was as if the panther and the lion and the serpents and the eagles and the hawks had penetrated his skin and lived inside him in a raging warfare " (p. 514). How then does the tattoo of Christ affect Parker?

The imagery of putting on Christ is not exactly new. St. Paul speaks of bearing the brand marks of Christ in his body (Galatians 6: 17). Generally these marks are taken to mean the physical punishments Paul had received because of his faith in Christ. Some researchers, however, feel these marks could be tattoos—either the marking of criminals or slaves or a freely adopted Christian sign of belonging to Christ with a seal upon their foreheads or hands as indicated in Revelation 7: 3 and elsewhere in that book.[7] Furthermore, in Catholic theology the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Orders are said to confer an " indelible mark " on the soul. Finally, St. Paul speaks of those who have been baptized as having " put on " Christ (Galatians 3: 27). These religious ways of speaking and the implied comparison with the penetrating spirit of the wild animals indicate what is to be expected of Parker's last tattoo. And it happens. When Parker at last puts on Christ, he receives the spirit of Christ and his life is changed.

The change takes place when Parker returns home to show Sarah Ruth his new tattoo. As he reaches the door of his house early in the morning, the rising sun (ancient symbol of Christ) pours its rays over Parker, who had spent the previous evening considering his soul " a spider web of facts and lies " like the unpleasant spider web designs used to pull together a conglomeration of American and especially European tattoos. He realized at that time that the eyes on his back were to be obeyed. Now, in the morning, he feels the " light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts " (p. 528). Now it is the spirit of Christ who lives in Parker and has transformed the pattern of his life. But because O'Connor always shows the way to glory through the cross, the image on Parker's back is changed to that of the suffering Christ when Sarah Ruth rejects the picture as idolatrous and beats his back until large welts form on Christ's face. The last scene shows Parker weeping under a pecan tree like some unwanted prophet.

" Parker's Back " is one of the most amusing of O'Connor's works —slapstick, jokes, puns, incongruous situations, reversed decisions, self-delusions, irony, parodies, sarcasm—all combine to make this an earthy, Chaucer-like story in its humor and seriousness. A peculiar aspect of her comic technique is the literalization of metaphor or trite sayings. In this story, for example, on a religious level, she shows what happens when a person " puts on Christ." This religious level, however, is closely allied with a basic human search for identity, meaning, and community. Hence her choice of the tattoo is quite in keeping with her themes and writing techniques, the mechanisms and history of the tattooing art, and with human aspirations throughout the centuries. Henry Field sums up tattooing in the following way:

> Painting, tattooing, and scarification in ancient times and among primitives of modern times seem to have been social processes tending toward unity and order. Such body-marks have indicated religious dedication as well as a wholesale bid for divine protection extending through this life into the exigencies of the life to come (Field 1958: 3).

Field's analysis shows how unerring Flannery O'Connor's sense of basic human drives was, how appropriately she selected tattooing, an outcast element, to mediate her criticism of two opposite approaches to the divine—the rationalistic, " modern " unbeliever, and the righteous, complacent " believer." As in the Gospel parable (Luke 14: 15–24), O'Connor goes out into the " highways and hedges " to find the true " wedding guests " among the neglected folk. For the sometimes shocking, rough outer practices of folk traditions may often preserve inner graces which modern sensibilities, in putting on respectability, have sloughed off. And how ironical it is that the " official " religion spurns God incarnate in a poor, broken figure.

NOTES

1. Marboro Books in New York often advertizes with full-page ads in newspapers and magazines. Books are named and a short description is given, along with the greatly reduced price of the remaindered book. The books can be ordered by mail. Unusual titles frequent the list, and their descriptions alone make interesting reading.

2. See Mayer 1972 and 1976, and Asals 1968 for examples.

3. Wada and Ishihara 1951: 43–44. The English translation is my own.

4. See Scutt and Gotch 1974: 46, and also Donald Richie 1980: 26.

5. Cf. *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*; Sturtevant 1971: 6; and Scutt and Gotch 1974: 28.

6. For the sailor's reasons, see Scutt and Gotch 1974: 60 and 90; see also Fellowes 1971, leaf opposite page 32.

7. Cf. Scutt and Gotch 1974: 65, and also Field 1958: 4: " Considerable data

have been collected to show that there has long existed a belief in the efficacy of tattooing in establishing a rapport between human and divine."

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