



Notes to Literature

Weekly Reading Booklet

#9 : Flannery
O'Connor's
"The Displaced
Person" (1954)

NL

NOTES TO LITERATURE

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Flannery O'Connor

From *The Displaced Person* (1954)

THE PEACOCK was following Mrs. Shortley up the road to the hill where she meant to stand. Moving one behind the other, they looked like a complete procession. Her arms were folded and as she mounted the prominence, she might have been the giant wife of the countryside, come out at some sign of danger to see what the trouble was. She stood on two tremendous legs, with the grand self-confidence of a mountain, and rose, up narrowing bulges of granite, to two icy blue points of light that pierced forward, surveying everything. She ignored the white afternoon sun which was creeping behind a ragged wall of cloud as if it pretended to be an intruder and cast her gaze down the red clay road that turned off from the highway.

The peacock stopped just behind her, his tail –glittering greengold and blue in the sunlight – lifted just enough so that it would not touch the ground. It flowed out on either side like a floating train and his head on the long blue reedlike neck was drawn back as if his attention were fixed in the distance on something no one else could see.

Mrs. Shortley was watching a black car turn through the gate from the highway. Over by the toolshed, about fifteen feet away, the two Negroes, Astor and Sulk, had stopped work to watch. They were hidden by a mulberry tree but Mrs. Shortley knew they were there.

Mrs. McIntyre was coming down the steps of her house to meet the car. She had on her largest smile but Mrs. Shortley, even from her distance, could detect a nervous slide in it. These people who were coming were only hired help, like the Shortleys themselves or the Negroes. Yet here was the owner of the place out to welcome them. Here she was, wearing her best clothes and a string of beads, and now bounding forward with her mouth stretched.

The car stopped at the walk just as she did and the priest was the first to get out. He was a long-legged black-suited old man with a white hat on and a collar that he wore backwards, which, Mrs. Shortley knew, was what priests did who wanted to be known as priests. It was this priest who had arranged for these people to come here. He opened the back door of the car and out jumped two children, a boy and a girl, and then, stepping more slowly, a woman in brown, shaped like a peanut. Then the front door opened and out stepped the man, the Displaced Person. He was short and a little swaybacked and wore gold-rimmed spectacles.

Mrs. Shortley's vision narrowed on him and then widened to include the woman and the two children in a group picture. The first thing that struck her as very peculiar was that they looked like other people. Every time she had seen them in her imagination, the image she had got was of the three bears, walking single file, with wooden shoes on like Dutchmen and sailor hats and bright coats with a lot of buttons. But the woman had on a dress she might have worn herself and the children weren't dressed like anybody from around. The man had on khaki pants and a blue shirt.

Suddenly, as Mrs. McIntyre held out her hands to him, he bobbed down from the waist and kissed it.

Mrs. Shortley jerked her own hand up toward her mouth and then after a second brought it down and rubbed it vigorously on her seat. If Mr. Shortley had tried to kiss her hand Mrs. McIntyre would have knocked him into the middle of next week, but then Mr. Shortley wouldn't have kissed her hand anyway. He didn't have time to mess around.

She looked closer, squinting. The boy was in the center of the group, talking. He was supposed to speak the most English because he had learned some in Poland and so he was to listen to his father's Polish and say it in English and then listen to Mrs. McIntyre's English and say that in Polish. The priest had told Mrs. McIntyre his name was Rudolph and he was twelve and the girl's name was Sledgewig and she was nine. Sledgewig sounded to Mrs. Shortley like something you would name a bug, or vice versa as if you named a boy Bollweevil. All of them's last name was something that only they themselves and the priest could pronounce. All she could make out of it was Gobblehook. She and Mrs. McIntyre had been calling them the Gobblehooks all week while they got ready for them.

There had been a great deal to do to get ready for them because they didn't have anything of their own, not a stick of furniture or a sheet or a dish, and everything had had to be scraped together out of things that Mrs. McIntyre couldn't use anymore herself.

They had collected a piece of odd furniture here and a piece there and they had taken some flowered chicken feed sacks and made curtains for the windows, two red and one green, because they had not had enough of the red sacks to go around. Mrs. McIntyre said she was not made of money and she could not afford to buy curtains.

"They can't talk," Mrs. Shortley said. "You reckon they'll know what colors even is?" and Mrs. McIntyre had said that after what those people had been through, they should be grateful for anything they could get. She said to think how lucky they were to escape from over there and come to a place like this.

Mrs. Shortley recalled a newsreel she had seen once of a small room piled high with bodies of dead naked people all in a heap, their arms and legs tangled together, 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. Before you could realize that it was real and take it into your head, the picture changed and a hollow-sounding voice was saying, "Time marches on!" This was the kind of thing that was happening every day in Europe where they had not advanced as in this country, and watching from her vantage point, Mrs. Shortley had the sudden intuition that the Gobblehooks, 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? The width and breadth of this question nearly shook her. Her stomach trembled as if there had been a slight quake in the heart of the mountain and automatically she moved down from her elevation and went forward to be introduced to them, as if she meant to find out at once what they were capable of.

She approached, stomach foremost, head back, arms folded, boots flopping gently against her large legs. About fifteen feet from the gesticulating group, she stopped and made her presence felt by training her gaze on the back of Mrs. Macintyre's neck. Mrs. McIntyre was a small woman of sixty with a round wrinkled face and red bangs that came almost down to two high orange-

colored penciled eyebrows. She had a little doll's mouth and eyes that were a soft blue when she opened them wide but more like steel or granite when she narrowed them to inspect a milk can. She had buried one husband and divorced two and Mrs. Shortley respected her as a person nobody had put anything over on yet—except, ha, ha, perhaps the Shortleys. She held out her arm in Mrs. Shortley's direction and said to the Rudolph boy, "And this is Mrs. Shortley.

Mr. Shortley is my dairyman. Where's Mr. Shortley," she asked as his wife began to approach again, her arms still folded. "I want him to meet the Guizacs."

Now it was Guizac. She wasn't calling them Gobblehook to their face. "Chancey's at the barn," Mrs. Shortley said. "He don't have time to rest himself in the bushes like them niggers over there."

Her look 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. She stood far enough away so that the man would not be able to kiss her hand. He looked directly at her with little green eyes and gave her a broad grin that was toothless on one side. Mrs. Shortley, without smiling, turned her attention to the little girl who stood by the mother, swinging her shoulders from side to side. She had long braided hair in two looped pigtails and there was no denying she was a pretty child even if she did have a bug's name. She was better looking than either Annie Maude or Sarah Mae, Mrs. Shortleys two girls going on fifteen and seventeen but Annie Maude had never got her growth and Sarah Mae had a cast in her eye. She compared the foreign boy to her son, H. C., and H. C. came out far ahead. H. C. was twenty years old with her build and eyeglasses. He was going to Bible school now and when he finished he was going to start him a church. He had a strong sweet voice for hymns and could sell anything. Mrs. Shortley looked at the priest and was reminded that these people did not have an advanced religion. There was no telling what all they believed since none of the foolishness had been reformed out of it. Again she saw the room piled high with bodies.

The priest spoke in a foreign way himself, English but as if he had a throatful of hay. He had a big nose and a bald rectangular face and head. While she was observing him, his large mouth dropped open and with a stare behind her, he said, "Arrrrrrr!" and pointed.

Mrs. Shortley spun around. The peacock was standing a few feet behind her, with his head slightly cocked.

“What a beautiful birdrrrd!” the priest murmured.

“Another mouth to feed,” Mrs. McIntyre said, glancing in the peafowl’s direction.

“And when does he raise his splendid tail?” Asked the priest.

“Just when it suits him,” she said. “There used to be twenty or thirty of those things on the place but I’ve let them die off. I don’t like to hear them scream in the middle of the night.”

“So beautiful,” the priest said. “A tail full of suns,” and he crept forward on tiptoe and looked down on the bird’s back where the polished gold and green design began. The peacock stood still as if he had just come down from some sun-drenched height to be a vision for them all. The priest’s homely red face hung over him, glowing with pleasure.

Mrs. Shortley’s mouth had drawn acidly to one side. “Nothing but a peachicken,” she muttered.

Mrs. McIntyre raised her orange eyebrows and exchanged a look with her to indicate that the old man was in his second childhood.

“Well, we must show the Guizacs their new home,” she said impatiently and she herded them into the car again. The peacock stepped off toward the mulberry tree where the two Negroes were hiding and the priest turned his absorbed face away and got in the car and drove the displaced people down to the shack they were to occupy.

Mrs. Shortley waited until the car was out of sight and then she made her way circuitously to the mulberry tree and stood about ten feet behind the two Negroes, one an old man holding a bucket half full of calf feed and the other a yellowish boy with a short woodchuck-like head pushed into a rounded felt hat. “Well,” she said slowly, “yawl have looked long enough. What you think about them?”

The old man, Astor, raised himself. “We been watching,” he said as if this would be news to her. “Who they now?”

“They come from over the water,” Mrs. Shortley said with a wave of her arm. “They’re what is called Displaced Persons.”

“Displaced Persons,” he said. “Well now. I declare. What do that mean?”

“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.”

The illogic of Negro-thinking always irked Mrs. Shortley. “They ain’t where they belong to be at,” she said. “They belong to be back over yonder where everything is still like they been used to.

Over here it’s more advanced than where they come from. But yawl better look out now,” she said and nodded her head. “There’s about ten million billion more just like them and I know what Mrs. McIntyre said.”

“Say what?” the young one asked. “Places are not easy to get nowadays, for white or black, but I reckon I heard what she stated to me,” she said in a sing-song voice.

“You liable to hear most anything,” the old man remarked, leaning forward as if he were about to walk off but holding himself suspended.

“I heard her say, ‘This is going to put the Fear of the Lord into those shiftless niggers!’” Mrs. Shortley said in a ringing voice.

The old man started off. “She say something like that every now and then,” he said. “Ha, Ha. Yes indeed.”

“You better get on in that barn and help Mr. Shortley,” she said to the other one. “What you reckon she pays you for?”

“He the one sent me out,” the Negro muttered. “He the one gimme something else to do.”

“Well you better get to doing it then,” she said and stood there until he moved off. Then she stood a while longer, reflecting, her unseeing eyes directly in front of the peacock’s tail. He had jumped into the tree and his tail hung in front of her, full of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second’s light and salmon-colored in the next. She might have been looking at a map of the universe but she didn’t notice it any more than she did the spots of sky that cracked the dull green of the tree. She was having an inner vision instead. She was seeing the ten million billion of them pushing their way into new places over here and herself, a giant angel with wings as wide as a house, telling the Negroes that they would have to

find another place. She turned herself in the direction of the barn, musing on this, her expression lofty and satisfied.

From Gillian Rose, “Beginnings of the day - Fascism and Representation” in *Mourning Becomes the Law* (1996)

I shall play the Fool to the sovereignty of the rubric ‘Modernity, Culture and “the Jew”’ hidden in its ethic of ‘non-totalising’ pluralism.

I shall start by questioning what I call ‘Holocaust piety’, evident across the whole range of responses to Spielberg’s film *Schindler’s List*, and I shall propose instead that we situate ourselves within what I call ‘Holocaust ethnography’. ‘Holocaust ethnography’ permits the exploration of the representation of Fascism and the fascism of representation to be pursued across the production, distribution and reception of cultural works.

The demonstration that Fascism and representation are inseparable does not lead to the conclusion, current in post-modern aesthetics, philosophy and political theory, that representation is or should be superseded. On the contrary, the argument for the overcoming of representation, in its aesthetic, philosophical and political versions, converges with the inner tendency of Fascism itself.

Only the persistence of always fallible and contestable representation opens the possibility for our acknowledgement of mutual implication in the fascism of our cultural rites and rituals.

If fascism promises beginnings of the day, representation exposes the interests of the middle of the day; then the owl of Minerva, flying at dusk, may reflect on the remains of the day - the ruins of the morning's hope, the actuality of the broken middles.

This chapter falls into three parts: Fascism and Aesthetic Representation; Fascism and Philosophical Representation; and Fascism and Political Representation.

FASCISM AND AESTHETIC REPRESENTATION

Schindler's List has been discussed ultimately in terms of its adequacy as memorial and monument to 'the Jews'. This involves a deeper argument than the generally agreed point that the film informs audiences, especially young audiences, of matters of which they would otherwise remain ignorant: that it overcomes knowledge-resistance to the Holocaust, a resistance which we know to be growing. Yet, as Freud argued, knowledge-resistance is the first and easiest of the five resistances to overcome. In particular, overcoming knowledge-resistance does not amount to working through the repressed emotions which dominate and inhibit the individual, so as to free the ego and restore effectivity.

At the heart of Bryan Cheyett's excellent review of Schindler's List (TLS, 18 February 1994), in which he compares the representation of the unequivocally sadistic Nazi, Goeth, with Schindler, 'a tabula rasa on which both the potential for good and evil can be inscribed', lies the following judgement: 'Schindler's List fails only when it, too [like Keneally's original fictionalisation Schindler's Ark], becomes a seductive and self-confident narrative at the cost of any real understanding of the difficulties inherent *in representing the ineffable*' (my emphasis). Not surprisingly, one of the published critical replies to Cheyenne (Alan G. Gross, TLS, 18 March 1994) wholly rejects his nuanced appraisal of the film in the name of this 'ineffability', citing Habermas in support:

There [in Auschwitz] something happened, that up to now nobody considered as even possible. There one touched on something which represents the deep layer of solidarity among all that wears a human

face; notwithstanding the usual acts of beastliness of human history, the integrity of this common layer has been taken for granted... Auschwitz has changed the basis for the continuity of the conditions of life within history.

It is this reference to 'the ineffable' that I would dub 'Holocaust piety'. How is it to be construed and what is its economics? 'The ineffable' is invoked by a now wide-spread tradition of reflection on the Holocaust: by Adorno, by Holocaust theology, Christian and Jewish, more recently by Lyotard, and now by Habermas. According to this view, 'Auschwitz' or the 'the Holocaust' are emblems for the breakdown in divine and/or human history. The uniqueness of this break delegitimises names and narratives as such, and hence all aesthetic or apprehensive representation (Lyotard).

The passage from Habermas indicates a trauma, a loss of trust in human solidarity, that marks the epoch which persists. In this way, the search for a decent response to those brutally destroyed is conflated with the quite different response called for in the face of the 'inhuman' capacity for such destruction. To argue for silence, prayer, the banishment equally of poetry and knowledge, in short, the witness of 'ineffability', that is, non-representability, is to mystify something we dare not understand, because we fear that it may be all too understandable, all too continuous with what we are – human, all too human.

What is it that we do not want to understand What is it that Holocaust piety in films and reviews once again protect us from understanding?

Further Reading Suggestions

Recommended Secondary Literature:

* Bal, M. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1978)

* Booth, W. *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961)

* Iser, W. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (1974)

* Phelan, J. *A Companion to Narrative Theory* (2005)

You can find a full list of suggestions for further reading and secondary literature on all of the primary texts in these booklets on the website:

<https://www.notestoliterature.com/twelve-books-to-have>

About Notes to Literature

Notes is an e-learning project that offers personalised higher-education tuition in European literature, history and philosophy. At its core are 12 short courses on modern and classical authors, including (among others) Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Dante, Shakespeare, Karl Marx, and James Joyce. The courses can be taken on a one-to-one or a small group basis, and starting dates are flexible. Just sign up for modules of interest on the website. Notes was set up with the specific idea of creating a short series of courses that would provide adult and young adult learners with a foundational, integrated and critical study of the history of Western thought and literature. This idea reflects our belief that creative and critical response to this tradition has an important role to play in understanding our current selves and predicaments, as well as in imagining and fashioning our possible futures.

If you would like more information about Notes to Literature, please do get in touch with me at jonathan@notestoliterature.com or visit the website: notestoliterature.com.

If you are a school, or a company, and would like to inquire about arranging courses for your students or employees, please reach out. I can provide further details on the different kinds of approaches and services I offer depending on the particular learning contexts.

If you would like to pursue further independent reading on any of the authors in the booklet, or if you are setting up a reading group, I'm always happy to send on reading lists and guided reading questions that might be helpful for your discussions.

And of course, if you are interested in taking a course with Notes, I'd be delighted to hear from you. I offer free no-obligation meetings to discuss your goals, talk about some aspects of my approach, and think about how the courses could be tailored for you.

Happy reading.



About Me : Jonathan Gallagher

I received my doctorate in 2019 from the University of Edinburgh, where I taught several undergraduate courses, ranging from medieval and early modern literature, to Romantic, Modernist and Late-Modernist poetry and drama. My doctoral research examined the relationship between processes of state-formation in early modern England and the spectacular flourishing of religious poetry witnessed during the same period. This work has been published by leading academic journals in my field, and tries to show that religious poetry was vitally and critically responsive to broad changes in social relations and practices of rule in 17C England.

In my teaching, as in my research, I'm drawn to examining intellectual history and literary art in the context of given social and political conditions. With that in mind, in 2022, I founded Notes to Literature. My hope is that Notes will grow into a distinguished provider of personalised adult education in the humanities. The plan is to go about this one client at a time.

You can learn more about Notes and me here: <https://www.notestoliterature.com/my-work>

<https://edinburgh.academia.edu/JonathanGallagher>