



Flannery O'Connor, the Phenomenology of Race, and the Institutions of Irony

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Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" was originally published in the *Kenyon Review* in April 1955. The story would be published again later the same year in the collection *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, but its initial editing and publication occurred in consultation with John Crowe Ransom, *Kenyon Review's* founding editor. During the editing process, Ransom asked if O'Connor would like to alter her story's title to avoid insulting "black folk's sensibilities" (quoted in Armstrong 2004: 298). O'Connor declined the request, insisting instead that the title was "much more damaging to white folk's sensibilities." This dialogue occurred only a few months after the *Brown v. Board* decision and not long before the two events that forced the civil rights movement into mainstream white consciousness: the murder of Emmett Till in August 1955 and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in December 1955. O'Connor's repartee with Ransom thus occurred in the midst of the growing outcry against institutional racism. According to O'Connor, the title of her story is meant to offend the racial sensibilities of the offenders, and in fact she explains in a letter dated May 4, 1955 to one of her readers, "What I had in mind to suggest with the artificial nigger was the redemptive quality of the Negro's suffering for us all" (HB 78). In both her letter to a reader and her response to one of the leading New Critics who exerted significant influence on the shape of postwar fiction, O'Connor positions herself as an outsider whose fiction criticizes white mainstream America and its view of race. By identifying with "the Negro's suffering," O'Connor felt her story created an avenue for racial and social redemption. Such explanations are consistent with the common claim among the story's critics that the enigmatic ending amounts to a "working of grace" (Oates 1998: 160), a method of reconciliation and unexpected enlightenment.

Other critics have been less quick to take O'Connor's gloss as gospel. Nicholas Crawford (2003: 3), for example, identifies a "recurring pattern" in many of O'Connor's stories, wherein her black characters "catalyze" a white protagonist's "spiritual homecoming at the expense of a secular and psychological one." Crawford reframes O'Connor's claim that her fiction culminates in a "moment" in which "the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected" (*MM* 118). Instead, Crawford argues that these moments of grace often follow a racial rather than a religious pattern, one in which the black characters are not the subjects of empathy but a "psychological roadblock that hinders [the white characters'] archetypal return" (2003: 4). According to this view, O'Connor's black characters become little more than tools for a white homecoming.

Jeanne Perreault (2003: 390) similarly argues that O'Connor undermines her stated aspirations regarding racial solidarity by using the confrontation with a "large colored woman" to prompt one of the protagonists' "spiritual development." According to Perreault, the racial politics of the story "subverts her own deeply held belief in the necessity of unifying body and spirit for true spiritual integrity." In other words, O'Connor objectifies black bodies for the spiritual use of white ones. Indeed, these arguments by Crawford and Perreault depict O'Connor's engagement with institutional racism in a way that echoes Michael Szalay's (2012: 31) cultural history of the appropriation of blackness by many postwar writers in order to "produce new kinds of political meaning." In this view, O'Connor's depiction of race is not so much an avenue for religious grace as the expression of white fantasies about blackness during the era of the civil rights movement.

The interpretive problem centering on the confrontation of O'Connor's white characters with blackness is entangled with another of the story's historical registers—the relationship of postwar fiction to the institutions of American higher education. In *The Program Era* (2009), Mark McGurl argues that vast changes to American higher education helped reorganize the postwar marketplace for fiction. In particular, McGurl argues that the proliferation of creative writing programs and other institutional markers—for example, the writing textbook—shaped the core themes and styles of post-1945 American fiction. McGurl takes O'Connor's work as exemplifying many of the trends established by the Iowa Writers Workshop, where she earned an MFA in 1948. As McGurl's analysis suggests, O'Connor's relationship with Ransom in the 1950s represents an extension of her place within the institutional systems aggregating around the production and

consumption of American fiction. For example, late in 1952 O'Connor wrote to Ransom to apply for a *Kenyon Review* fellowship in fiction, which she received (*HB* 48–49). The fellowship featured a two thousand dollar award funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, and it established a loyal, professional relationship that prompted O'Connor to send many of her best stories to Ransom until he retired from the *Kenyon Review* in 1959. Even as O'Connor thought of her fiction as damaging to “white folk’s sensibilities,” she also nurtured professional ties to many of the mainstream institutions of postwar fiction.

These various threads suggest how O'Connor positioned herself as an “outsider” who criticized a dominant culture while she also cultivated her status as an “insider” dependent on the postwar institutions of fiction writing, such as the writing program, the literary review housed in an English department, and the *New Critic* editor. This outsider-insider tension takes on additional dimensions in the philosophical contours of her depiction of race and her use of irony in “The Artificial Nigger.” This essay argues that the story trades on the categories of continental philosophy—namely, existentialism and phenomenology—that were at odds with the prevailing methodologies in American philosophy departments but nonetheless enjoyed conspicuous cultural cachet among postwar writers and intellectuals.¹ This intersection of race and continental philosophy, I argue, is a feature of O'Connor’s attempts to negotiate the institutionality of the production and consumption of fiction in the postwar moment. Her use of irony draws on the established conventions of the creative writing program and the *New Criticism* common in the US academy. Both phenomenology and irony thus function as mechanisms for O'Connor to distance her fiction from academia and Southern racial politics. However, the paradoxical fact of the deeply institutional histories of her forms of irony and phenomenology complicate these aspirations. In the last section of this essay, though, I consider whether the story’s irony qualifies its relationship to such institutional systems by recursively questioning the value of fiction.

Who’s Afraid of Phenomenology?

Evaluating the institutional stakes of O'Connor’s story involves considering the history of the deepening rift between American academic philosophy and the philosophical ideas that enjoyed cultural capital among postwar writers and intellectuals. While I later argue that phenomenological vocabulary marks O'Connor’s representation of Head

and Nelson's experience of race, I also suggest that this philosophical frame be understood as a feature both of postwar intellectual life and O'Connor's attempts to think against the grain of the academic discipline of philosophy in the United States. Indeed, this discipline underwent vast changes after the Second World War. From the turn of the century until the 1940s, the idea of "academic American philosophy" at best refers to an assemblage of disparate methodologies that could generally be associated with the traditions of either idealism or realism (see Benjamin 1950: 373, 378–80). In a 1930 two-volume collection called *Contemporary American Philosophy*, for example, there are dozens of philosophers but hardly a repeated philosophy (see Adams and Montague 1930). Eminent names include John Dewey and George Santayana, European debts are acknowledged to the likes of Immanuel Kant and G. W. F. Hegel, and the pragmatism of William James and Charles S. Peirce influences the disciplinary landscape (though it declined with the dawn of the Cold War [Menand 2001: 438–42])—a diversity attesting to the fact that the academic discipline of philosophy well into the 1940s lacked methodological coherence. This *mélange* led philosopher A. Cornelius Benjamin (1950: 372) to declare that, at least during the period from 1925 to 1950, "American philosophers believe so firmly in pluralism that no two of them accept the same philosophy."

While a wide spectrum of ideas emerged from the racially homogeneous group of men who taught philosophy in American colleges and universities, in the first half of the twentieth century the philosophical method known as phenomenology occupied very little space on that spectrum. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) did influence American thinkers beginning in the second decade of the nineteenth century, yet American Hegelian thought largely took the *Geist* but left the phenomenology.² Indeed, it wasn't until Marvin Farber (1950) founded the journal *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* in 1940 that the methodology was taken up in the United States in its twentieth-century academic iteration. In this iteration, phenomenology names a philosophical method that aspires to attain direct experience of the phenomena outside an individual's consciousness. It thus takes perception as its central epistemological problem. Farber adapted this aspiration from Edmund Husserl's work, which James Edie (1965: 115) described in 1964 as at best an "exotic import" among academic philosophers. Whatever phenomenology was in the United States at mid-century, most of the nation's academic philosophers didn't consider it to be an American way of thinking.

The “exotic” reputation of Husserl and the dubious aura surrounding his student Martin Heidegger, who sympathized with the Nazi regime, attest to the political context shaping which varieties of phenomenology entered the United States. Although in the wake of the Second World War German philosophy itself was suspect, there was widespread cultural appeal to the phenomenological project of contemplating existential meaninglessness in a French café. Thinkers in the United States during the 1940s and 1950s, including women writers like Marjorie Grene and Hazel Barnes, black writers like Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright, and the *Partisan Review* editor and philosopher William Barrett, wrote widely about French intellectual life (see Cotkin 2003: 161–83). Thus, a racially homogeneous discipline of male academics scorned what a wider swath of American intellectual life embraced. Indeed, trade magazines such as *Life* and major news outlets such as the *New York Times* also capitalized on a wider reading public’s fascination with French thought (see Fizell 1946; Brown 1946; Barres 1947). In these ways, French existentialism garnered significant cultural capital in the United States during the postwar era.

The treatment of existentialism on the pages of both *Life* and the *Partisan Review* stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing sentiments among American academic philosophers. Richard McKeon (1950: 345), for example, remarked in 1950 that existentialism “refuses to look for knowledge in the sciences where it is to be found, but instead dissociates philosophy and science.” Similarly, Farber (1950: 431) emphasizes that “our present scientific perspective” precludes any legitimate standing for the likes of Søren Kierkegaard or Jean-Paul Sartre. The “prestige [of the sciences] in America is so great,” Farber explains, “that there is no room in respectable circles for self-styled oracles mouthing general statements about man—his anxiety, his ‘forlornness,’ or his ‘thrownness,’ whether theological or supposedly natural” (430). According to many of the leading academic philosophers of the 1940s and 1950s, philosophy is a science, existential anxiety a melodrama.³ But while these sentiments may have prevailed among academics, the “respectable circles” in the literary marketplace felt differently. The Pulitzer Prize committee, for example, gave its award to W. H. Auden’s *The Age of Anxiety* (1947), and existential angst likewise enjoyed “prestige” in many other arenas of the literary marketplace (Mangrum 2015).

This historical rift between nonacademic intellectual life and the discipline of American philosophy—including their significant demographic differences—is important to understanding the institutional self-positioning of O’Connor’s short fiction in the 1950s. The

philosophical contours of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* put her at odds with some of the dominant assumptions of academic philosophy in America, making her an outsider among a certain set of institutionally authoritative thinkers. Those few academics who were familiar with German phenomenology felt that Husserl had taken up the right project but had failed: his notion of developing a “rigorous scientific method” for the direct experience of phenomena in the world would have been just what philosophy needed, thinkers like Farber felt, if only his attempts weren’t so vague and metaphysical.⁴ What’s more, while American academics rejected German phenomenology as a failed project, they also scorned Sartre’s existentialism, his own version of the phenomenological method (Fulton 1999: 83). Because the existential focus on consciousness, angst, and authenticity simply wasn’t consistent with American disciplinary practices, existentialism was considered “very foreign and lacking in rigor,” as the postwar American philosopher James Collins (1952: vii) explained. In sum, German phenomenologists and their French existentialist heirs were situated among American academics somewhere between being virtually unknown and categorically ridiculed.

Where most American academic philosophers privileged science, O’Connor’s primary intellectual debts during this period were to Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, Sartre, and the Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel. She heavily annotated Collins’s 1952 text, which defines the existentialist variety of phenomenology as the study of “objects precisely as they present themselves immanently in consciousness for purposes of knowledge” (quoted in O’Gorman 2004: 79). This fuzzy definition glosses the phenomenological method as an attempt to get beyond metaphysical speculation about a realm of, say, Platonic essences or theological justifications for the meanings we find in the world. The phenomenologist is trying not to know the essence of a “chair” or “human being” as they exist in an ideal or heavenly realm but, rather, to grasp an object in the world as it is in itself—that is, to have direct experience of particular phenomena. As a result, phenomenologists often maintain that objects “present themselves” to human consciousness. Yet part of the problem with having direct experience, they reason, is that one’s language and assumptions about the world are “given” by others. How can we have direct experiences if our capacities for experience are mediated through the ideas we get from our social existence? We can only have knowledge about the world outside the mind if we get beyond the “givenness” that mediates between the knowing act and the known object.

One important assumption within this philosophical tradition is the construal of things outside the mind as “objects” that have independence from the human capacity for cognition. The material world exists, phenomenology maintains, regardless of whether I think about it. An object’s “independence” from the mind is meant to reject the hazards associated with the radical idealism of George Berkeley (1685–1753), who argues that the existence of material objects is wholly dependent on human cognition, that things only exist because we think them. For phenomenology, the problem with the idea that objects are *dependent* on cognition is that such radical idealism isolates individuals within the silos of their own minds. So, in order for phenomena to be *independent*, phenomenology tends to explain those objects by the odd description of their “presenting themselves” to consciousness.

If isolated solipsism is one hazard, the phenomenological tradition also attempted to avoid a threat arising from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum—John Locke’s empiricism. As Collins (1952: 28) explains, phenomenology is a “logical inquiry into meanings,” while Locke’s classical empiricism focuses on “the variable psychic operations by which a truth is grasped” (see O’Gorman 2004: 79). The former searches for the logic governing the meaning of appearances, while the latter takes as certain only those sensible things that can be perceived. For phenomenology, then, truth is the logical or existential structure that gives meaning to the “appearances” of phenomena in the world; for classical empiricism, reality is a sequence of accumulated sense-experiences. The difficult task that phenomenology sets for itself is to reject the base materiality of strictly empirical knowledge while also formulating a method that tries to make sure we’re not—and the world is not—caught in a solipsistic silo. Where for Husserl this project could be achieved by ascertaining the logical structures of experience, for Sartre it was founded on a moment of authentic consciousness. And it is both the aspiration and the problems inherent in Sartre’s attempt that provide the implicit stage for O’Connor’s “The Artificial Nigger.”

Knowing, Seeing, and Not Knowing

O’Connor’s story begins with the prospect of a train ride from rural Georgia into Atlanta. A white man named Mr. Head plans the journey to enlighten his grandson about the evils of the urban environment. Nelson, Head’s grandson, was born in the city—a fact that is a source of pride for the provincial boy but worries his grandfather. Head thus conceives of

the trip “in moral terms,” which is to say that he wants Nelson to learn “that he had no cause for pride merely because he had been born in a city. [Nelson] was to find out that the city is not a great place” (*GM* 105). There are several conventional distinctions implicit in the story’s framing, such as the opposition between the city and the country, between rural ignorance and urban enlightenment, and between an older Virgilesque man who is the guide through a moral wasteland and his soon-to-be-enlightened cultural descendant. (In fact, *The Divine Comedy* is the central but ironic source of metaphor for the story.) Yet it soon becomes apparent that the distinction that matters most in the text—and the primary distinction that Head wants Nelson to experience—is the purportedly intrinsic separation between races. These are the “moral terms” of the trip, as Head overlays *good* and *bad* with *white* and *black*. If Head performs the role of Virgil, he wants to tutor Nelson about the evils of blackness exemplified in an urban hell.

This is obvious enough in the story, particularly when Head tries to invalidate his grandson’s source of pride by saying, “You ain’t even seen a nigger. . . . There hasn’t been a nigger in this county since we run that one out twelve years ago and that was before you were born” (107). When Nelson says that he might have seen a person of color as an infant before being brought to his grandfather’s country home, Head responds, “If you seen one you didn’t know what he was. . . . A six-month-old child don’t know a nigger from anybody else.” Head’s response is important because it frames the trip—and the enigmatic ending of the story—in the terms of *seeing* as the basis for *knowing*. On the one hand, the premise of the trip to the city is that direct experience of a thing is the route to certain knowledge. Head takes his grandson to Atlanta to “find out that the city is not a great place.” However, Head fails to recognize that his ideas about moral tutoring and direct experience are at odds with his claim that a “six-month-old child” wouldn’t know to attribute a racial designation to another person. If *seeing* is supposed to be the direct experience that forms the basis for certain knowledge, Head fails to recognize that there are structures of thought that frame experience. He seems to believe that to see a person of color as an adult would be to “know what he was,” as if the senses were always already a direct route to unmediated knowledge. Nelson, too, says, “I reckon I’ll know a nigger if I see one.” Head’s assumptions about the basis for knowledge and Nelson’s confidence in his ability to know both turn out to be misguided and self-deceiving.

These failures to know are prefigured when Head and Nelson board the train that takes them into the city. When they enter the train car and find their seat, Head orders his grandson, "Get in there by the winder." The boy obeys, but the result is a telling image that interrogates the initial relation between seeing and knowing: Nelson "sat down and turned his head to the glass. There he saw a pale ghost-like face scowling at him beneath the brim of a pale ghost-like hat. His grandfather, looking quickly too, saw a different ghost, pale but grinning, under a black hat" (109). The boy and his grandfather look at the outside world coursing by the train window through images of themselves. More than seeing through a glass dimly, they see through the mediation of their self-images. Their view of the world is inflected through prior structures of perception. Indeed, later on the train ride after Head has annoyed and chased away nearby passengers, he "looked out the window, through his own reflection, and read aloud the names of the buildings they were passing" (114). Head reads the world—he gathers sense-experiences—but he does so by looking through a "reflection" of his conscious self. This motif echoes the philosophical problem of what Sartre, Heidegger, and others describe as the "given" nature of the world. Seeing and reading are in fact not forms of direct experience; rather, without introspection about the conditions for knowledge-gathering, the characters see the world as it's overlaid with images of themselves.

This might suggest a kind of solipsism that alienates Nelson and his grandfather from a wider world. As is suggested by his name, *Mr. Head* not only seems incapable of empathy but also derives his authority (the title *Mr.*) from what he supposedly *knows*. Yet the fact that this is a collective journey—a grandfather and grandson—complicates the reading of these characters as purely solipsistic. Instead, the problem implicit in the self-images that mediate the characters' view of the world is better understood in the terms of the existentialists' ambition to arrive at what they sometimes describe as the true nature of being. "Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought," Heidegger (1962: 24) writes, and thus pursuing knowledge means necessarily getting beyond both empirical sense-experience and the world as it is given by culture, tradition, and so on. Heidegger is thus concerned not only with the mediated nature of experience but also with the human capacity for introspection about mediating structures of thought. How can one ask the right questions about the givenness that mediates between human beings and reality in a way that doesn't simply reinforce one's presuppositions?

O'Connor's interrogation of Head's racial-moral terms in the story is a form of this phenomenological line of questioning about the givenness of experience. After a "coffee-colored man" with a "light suit and a yellow satin tie" (*GM* 111) walks down the aisle through the train car on their way to the city, Head excitedly asks Nelson, "What was that?" And Nelson answers simply, "A man." When Head asks, "What kind of man?," wanting to prove his grandson does not yet recognize racial difference, Nelson answers with other descriptions, none of which have to do with the color of the man's skin. Head finally declares, "That was a nigger," surprising Nelson and prompting the grandfather to ridicule his grandson for seeing but not knowing. This failure to know based on seeing instructs the boy about the meaning of race—"You said they were black" (112), Nelson complains to his grandfather—but this scene also suggests that race, rather than being an object of pure consciousness or a truth about an unmediated reality, is a window Head orders his grandson to sit next to. The scene presents the designation of another in the terms of race as if it were the ghostly image that the characters see reflected back when they look through the window onto the world. The idea of race is what Nelson comes to see when he's not seeing the other directly; it is nothing more than a term given to him by his grandfather.

As it exhibits racism as learned through experience and depicts the idea of race as an invented frame for experience, O'Connor's story recalls a philosophical problem that plagued Sartre and many other existentialists. Sartre explains this problem as one inherent to the phenomenological method. If that method begins with the assumption that the truth about reality is accessible through the resources of individual consciousness, then Sartre (2007: 18) worries that this starting point renders the philosopher "incapable of re-establishing solidarity with those who exist outside of the self." If one begins with the premise that consciousness is the basis for direct experience of reality, aren't we all trapped in the isolation of our consciously thinking selves?

Sartre's solution to this problem is to suggest that the nature of subjective consciousness is rooted in shared conditions of knowledge. We can know the same things as others, according to Sartre, because the nature of consciousness is "intersubjective." This line of argument requires fancy footwork. On the one hand, Sartre insists that "all objects are merely probable" (40) unless one begins with consciousness as the foundation of knowledge. On the other, Sartre maintains that this phenomenological method makes the self interdependent with others, because the individual "who becomes aware of himself directly in the

cogito also perceives all others" (41). In other words, Sartre argues that consciousness becomes authentic at the moment when the thinking self recognizes the existence of other thinking beings. Recognition—seeing rightly—occurs when one perceives that existence is shared with others. Therefore, according to Sartre, consciousness as the basis of knowledge is predicated on the "intersubjectivity" of the world (42).

While "The Artificial Nigger" trades on the concerns of existentialism, its ending casts doubt on the Sartrean idea that intersubjectivity redeems an otherwise solipsistic phenomenological method. Eventually, Nelson and his grandfather become lost in the city streets. Head then publicly denies his grandson after Nelson accidentally injures an elderly lady. Confronted with his grandson's behavior, Head tells a policeman, "This is not my boy. . . . I never seen him before" as onlookers stare at Head "with horror, as if they were so repulsed by a man who would deny his own image and likeness" (*GM* 126). Whereas earlier Nelson and Head see the world through the mediation of their self-images, the public disgrace of the episode creates a fissure in this initial form of mediated perception, alienating the two from one another. The journey of moral instruction culminates in Head's denial of "his own image and likeness," signaling his shame at finding the consequences of his self-image manifest in the world.

After being denied, Nelson follows his grandfather in their search for a way out of the city, but Head "could feel the boy's steady hate," which he knows "would continue just that way for the rest of his life" (128). Indeed, Head himself looks "ravaged and abandoned," and he "felt he knew now . . . what man would be like without salvation" (129). This scene shares the vocabulary of the existential crisis: confronted with "his own image," Head denies it, just as in Sartre's *Nausea* (1938) Antoine Roquentin says, "I stare at myself, I disgust myself" and "Finally I flee from my image and fall on the bed" (1964: 31). In both fictions, existential authenticity ostensibly derives from self-disgust. As Sartre (2007: 40) puts it, for consciousness to confront itself, the thinking self often first falls into despair. Existentialism may be a humanism, but it's also a philosophically justified form of self-loathing.

If Head falls into despair after finding his image in the world, the ominous quality of the revelation is in fact signaled from the story's beginning. "Mr. Head awakened to discover that the room was full of moonlight," reads the opening line of the story, framing the narrative in the terms of an awakening, consciousness coming to itself (*GM* 103). However, the "dignifying light" that the moon casts is ironic and

inauspicious, making “Mr. Head’s trousers,” hanging on the back of a chair, appear “like the garment some great man had just flung to his servant.” Head is not a great man and, as the story later suggests, he also fails as both a reader and “one of the great guides of men” (104). The existential terms of the story are thus employed from the beginning with a wry and suspicious irony.

If irony is an implicit feature of the existential contours of the story, then Nelson and Head’s alienation in the city may be little more than a reflection of their state before arriving in Atlanta. In a number of stories in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, there are startling or grotesque forms of redemption, but in this one the ending is especially ambiguous. It stages an existential crisis—a damning confrontation with one’s self-image as a route to a more thoroughgoing reality—only to exhibit the ambiguities of such a confrontation. Before returning home, Nelson and his grandfather stumble on “the plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence that curved around a wide lawn. The Negro was about Nelson’s size and he was pitched forward at an unsteady angle because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked. One of his eyes was entirely white and he held a piece of brown watermelon” (130). The statue prompts an enigmatic response from the two characters, who stand “in almost exactly the same way” and stare with hands trembling “identically in their pockets.” Nelson and Head, who had been alienated from each other, become united again before the plaster figure, which dissipates their despair and remedies their mutual sense of abandonment. A representational fiction unites them; the presence of a fictional “blackness” shores up their shared whiteness.

The language of this union, moreover, is deeply religious: “They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat. They could both feel it dissolving their differences like an action of mercy. . . . Nelson’s eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence” (131). It’s as if the two were staring at the image of a crucified Christ (“a monument to another’s victory”), which facilitates both divine and human communion despite the inadequacies of the devotees. While once they were lost, now they’re found. For the white spectators, the representational fiction of a racist object has healed the rifts in consciousness.

The ironic association of the religious imagery of absolution with a racist icon renders the phenomenological aspiration of intersubjectivity here deeply suspect. For phenomenology, as Collins (1952: 33) describes

it, "intersubjective communication is upheld because of the possibility of intending the same world of objects and because of sharing in the common type of universal consciousness." The consciousness Nelson and Head share, however, is constructed through a series of racial distinctions shrouded by a thin moral and religious veil. They intend the "same world of objects," but the object is a commercial artifact of racist culture. This "world of objects" that facilitates their "intersubjective communication" or reconciliation is ironically artificial and conspicuously dilapidated.

O'Connor's story thus negotiates a complicated position for itself. By drawing on the terms and concerns of continental thought, the philosophical contours of the story stand as institutionally illegitimate, at least according to the disciplinary terms of American philosophy departments.⁵ And by ironizing the enlightenment and redemption of two white characters through a racist icon, O'Connor further positions herself as an "outsider" critical of prevailing cultural and social values. She thus uses a "foreign" phenomenological method to ironize the constitutive terms of white supremacy in the United States. What's more, the story interrogates existentialism itself, in effect asking, "What if the terms and meanings of an intersubjective milieu are articulated through hate, discrimination, and shame?" After all, the structures of Nelson's consciousness are pieced together largely from the racist moral terms of those around him. Rather than solving the threat of solipsism that harries the phenomenological method, Sartre's account of intersubjectivity may merely relocate the problems of mediated knowledge and social ethics to a different philosophical register. In particular, Sartre's account evades the problem of evaluating the moral terms of shared or intersubjective ways of seeing and knowing. How, for him, can one adjudicate between the inevitable differences in, say, Nelson and Head's shared consciousness and the unexplored consciousness of the black characters on the margins of O'Connor's story?

In this light, "The Artificial Nigger" points to the limitations of existentialism in the era of civil rights protest. While institutional racism and political justice fell outside the disciplinary concerns of most postwar academic philosophers, in O'Connor's story the ethical impulse and existential resources of Sartre's philosophy also seem inadequate. Even as she relies on this "foreign" philosophy in her self-stylization, she also rejects the work of the authoritative Frenchman as an adequate solution for the existential problems addressed in her fiction. For Nelson and Head, whiteness functions like a religion, and it is their racial perception that spurs their experience of the "mystery of existence."

And the existential patina of their perception justifies their sense of racial superiority. Indeed, if Nelson and Head's intersubjective forms of knowing elevate racial distinctions to such an existential register, then the Sartrean turn toward intersubjectivity as the ethical goal of "consciousness confronting itself" (Sartre 2007: 40) seems to introduce more problems about authenticity than it addresses. Privileging the position of the individual subject's perception, while it offers a philosophical base for the critique of the givenness of the idea of race, fails to provide an alternative ethical frame for interrogating mainstream white society's denigration of the personhood and social equality of black Americans.

Fiction, Irony, and the New Critics

As I've argued, O'Connor's story draws on existentialist thought to suggest that race is a perception of the experience of belonging—an experience that depends on the objectification of another in the consciousness of the perceiving subject. The unity made possible through intersubjective conditions is formed on the basis of exclusion. This phenomenological cast to the account of race in "The Artificial Nigger" bears out Florence Dore's (2007: 240) argument that "the impulse toward white purity" in O'Connor's fiction "aborts rather than initiates narratives of development." Rather than arriving at a new state of enlightenment after their Dantean journey through Atlanta, Nelson and Head instead find themselves in the same state as when they set out from their rural home. What's more, if the phenomenological cast of the narrative suggests that affirming the priority of shared ways of knowing is the cost of overcoming solipsism, the story's constant ironizing suggests that the phenomenologist's account of intersubjectivity at best only sanctions a different order of alienation. Irony, as I have argued, reveals that intersubjectivity only raises a different form of the problem of authentic knowledge.

This use of irony to raise questions about a European thinker has historical and institutional registers, for "irony" is in fact one of the recurring terms in the vocabulary of the New Critics. Robert Penn Warren (1935) describes the early poetry of John Crowe Ransom as a "study in irony," for example, and the textbook *Understanding Fiction* (1943), which Warren edited with Cleanth Brooks, touts irony as a "fictional structure" that "involves almost as much of vindictive opposition as of genial conspiracy" (1959: xvii). As Brooks would clarify in a 1948 defense of this account, an essay titled "Irony and 'Ironic'

Poetry,” the “wide variety of tones” involved in irony aim to “show the qualifications of the context” (233). Brooks’s last explanation is an insightful gloss on the type of irony in much of O’Connor’s fiction: Head’s reconciliation with his grandson through bigotry under the veil of religion *qualifies*—raises evaluative questions about—the narrative and existential contexts of the story’s final episode. As a result, the narrative moment of the “action of mercy” is, in the context of the story, deeply suspect.

At the dawn of the age of creative writing programs, many of the New Critics held that irony requires the reader to attend to problems of literary structure, meaning, and language, thus creating critical distance about a moment or image in its context within a work of literary art. For example, in a “defense” of Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749) published in the *Kenyon Review*, William Empson (1958: 218) refers to its “habitual double irony,” an approach, according to Empson, that requires the ironist to illuminate the “positions” of both a potential “tyrant” (219) and a common fictional reader. Empson had given such a high valuation to irony in *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), where he argues that literary irony cuts against the sympathies that fall on either side of whatever conflict structures the literary text. He writes:

The fundamental impulse of irony is to score off both the arguments that have been puzzling you, both sets of sympathies in your mind, both sorts of fool who will hear you; a plague on both their houses. It is because of the strength given by this antagonism that [irony] seems to get so safely outside the situation it assumes, to decide so easily about the doubt which it in fact accepts. This may seem a disagreeable pleasure in the ironist but he gives the same pleasure more or less secretly to his audience. (1974: 62)

Because this “impulse” makes the text a richer repository of meaning, Empson also argues that irony makes literary writing more fully striated with types of ambiguity ([1947] 1966: 38–47; 209–10). Cleanth Brooks similarly associates irony with wonder in *The Well-Wrought Urn* ([1947] 1975: 8, 18). For Brooks, the masterful use of irony yields not “a narrow and acerbic satire” but, rather, “an irony which accords with a wide recognition of the total situation” (102). Irony for the New Critics thus becomes a central criterion of literary value. Remaining poised between “the opposite, the complementary impulses,” as I. A. Richards ([1924] 2001: 234) puts it, is a sign of high literary value, because this position of

ironic suspension makes significant demands on the interpretive abilities of the reader. For the New Critics, irony complicates cultural and moral evaluation; it is therefore both sign and symbol of literary achievement.

In ironically criticizing both her characters' racist communion and the existentialist philosophy that animates that critique, O'Connor remains consistent with the prevailing sentiments about fiction writing in the postwar era. In other words, her ironic approach appears to reinforce a literary technique that had cultural value according to the established conventions that McGurl argues are rooted in the creative writing program, the writing textbook and anthology, and other material signifiers of American higher education. The privileging of irony is thus entangled with a particular institutionalization of fiction. Indeed, O'Connor developed much of her technique as a writer during the late 1940s, as an MFA student at Iowa. In addition to workshops with the program's influential director Paul Engle, O'Connor also wrote often about the influence Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Fiction* had on her work (a later edition of that textbook, in fact, included her story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" [McGurl 2009: 133–34]). Eileen Pollack (2007: 549) has questioned McGurl's account of O'Connor, arguing for example that the writer's use of "the effaced or limited third-person narrator," rather than being "mindless adherence to some stricture laid down by Brooks and Warren," was instead "the best solution to the very particular problems presented by her material" (550). But, as Pollack also acknowledges, the writing program's institutional structures of feeling nonetheless mark the contours and narrative choices of O'Connor's fiction.

McGurl's account of the writing program provides a historical frame for situating the irony of "The Artificial Nigger" as yet another feature of the institutional mechanisms through which literary creativity was validated and supported by a prescribed system. In this respect, the function of irony in O'Connor's story accords with McGurl's argument that postwar literary tastes bear the imprint of the institutional forces of American higher education and the creative writing program in particular. The Iowa Writers' Workshop, according to McGurl (2009: 177) "has dominated its field not so much through direct competition with other programs as through a 'viral' process of self-reproduction across the system of higher education," not only including the public relations campaigns launched by Engle but also the recursive processes through which the institutional importance of creative fiction is affirmed. The context for the "pleasure" of irony, as Empson puts it, is the institutionalization of literary production. Literary anthologies and

creative writing textbooks, for instance, manifest the institutionalization of a particular literary aesthetic. As such, McGurl argues that the institutional mechanisms of fiction are “conservative” in the sense that “their function is to establish continuities of practice in advance of individual action” (155).

The question regarding irony, then, is whether it too has a “conservative” function in O'Connor's story. And, more generally, is the historical place of irony within postwar fiction essentially one of establishing continuities of practice? O'Connor did read Brooks and Warren's textbook *Understanding Fiction* devotedly during her time at Iowa and then produced a story that became simultaneously representative and constitutive of “good fiction.” Is O'Connor's irony thus a conservative gesture? Is “The Artificial Nigger” less invested in criticizing white fantasies about race or the “sensibilities” of mainstream white readers than in reinforcing the cultural sensibilities of the New Critics and the norms of the mainstream institutions of higher education that supported the consumption and production of postwar creative writing?

Certainly the institutional value of irony in O'Connor's moment is historically contingent on the cultural mores promulgated by New Critics and the writerly conventions established in the creative writing program. The irony that functions as a distancing mechanism in “The Artificial Nigger” embeds the story within the literary institutions and conventional values of her historical moment. And while O'Connor's philosophy was at odds with the norms of higher education, and her irony was largely consistent with its programmatic systems and scripts, both were the common currency of the postwar literary marketplace.

At the same time, the value of irony is surely not circumscribed by the sensibilities of the New Critics and the creative writing program. Irony is older than Iowa. In Plato's writings, Socrates is often ironic, and the Roman poet Horace regularly uses irony and forms of sophisticated jesting, which also became influential during the Renaissance (Prescott 1999: 285). Kierkegaard (1989: 326), too, was fascinated with irony, in 1841 writing a dissertation, *The Concept of Irony with Constant Reference to Socrates*, in which he asserts, for example, “In our age there has been much talk about the importance of doubt for science and scholarship, but what doubt is to science, irony is to personal life. Just as scientists maintain that there is no true science without doubt, so it may be maintained with equal justice that no genuinely human life is possible without irony.” For Kierkegaard, irony undermines claims to knowledge that are taken for granted or insufficiently evaluated, ironists challenging

their own assumptions in addition to the conventional wisdom of the day. As a literary strategy, then, it obviously predates and extends beyond the institutional systems built around fiction in the postwar era.

Given these ancient and modern precursors, the critic may be tempted to apprehend the value of irony in “The Artificial Nigger” according to what Wai Chee Dimock (2006), adapting a key term from the French Annales School of historical writing, calls the “*longue durée*.” This “scale enlargement along the temporal axis,” as Dimock says of American literature read across the span of the *longue durée*, also seemingly “enlarges its spatial compass” (4). Contextualized within a long duration, a genre or literary gesture exceeds such spatially contingent institutional and information systems as the creative writing program. Critics of literary history’s *longue durée* thus place limits on how political and institutional histories determine the uses of irony. Neither a text’s value nor the meaning of its literary mechanisms are governed solely by its immediate history.

Irony in “The Artificial Nigger” offers a test case for literary historians and critics, seeming to invite multiple and often mutually interrogating registers of interpretation. Competing registers of interpretation, that is, pose historical, hermeneutic, and philosophical problems not solved by the other registers also clearly in play. O’Connor’s negotiation of the contemporary fault lines of American philosophy reinforces her status as a Sartrean or Kierkegaardian “outsider” who becomes “nauseous” in light of the social and religious scripts of her day. But in ironizing the phenomenologist’s method—highlighting how that philosophy fails to see what irony unveils—she suggests the inadequacies of abstract existential modes of thinking. And she navigates an almost exclusively male scene for American philosophy by employing “foreign” existentialist strategies while also interrogating the “foreign” Frenchman as a final arbiter.

The story’s intellectual and disciplinary engagements suggest how fiction picks up where continental philosophy leaves off: O’Connor’s short stories raise existential questions that get lost in Sartre’s abstract cul-de-sac. While it’s not surprising that a writer would affirm the value of ironic literature, this view of fiction is entangled with O’Connor’s self-stylization as a “serious” and “hard” writer (rather than the author of “horror stories,” a label she resisted [HB 90]). More specifically, the startling conflicts of her fiction place O’Connor within a cultural and institutional system that values, as McGurl (2009: 48) puts it, “the continuing interest of literary forms as objects of a certain kind of professional research.”⁶ Irony demands a certain kind of close reader,

inviting the moment of criticism—which presupposes some form of institutional training. The first register of irony, then, is as a reproduction of the scripts of the program era.

Yet even as the irony in O'Connor's narrative trades on forms of literary value rooted in New Criticism and the creative writing program, the irony of the story also qualifies these institutional registers as interpretive contexts. In particular, the self-reflexive character of O'Connor's irony also demonstrates how fiction itself can be complicit in the structures of racial inequality. This is clearest in the story's final paragraphs. After Nelson and Head's suspect reconciliation, their return home to the country seems to fortify their sense of racial superiority while also qualifying the earlier "action of mercy." As Nelson and Head's train disappears "like a frightened serpent into the woods" and Nelson declares that he will "never go back again" (*GM* 132) to the city, this language on one level suggests that as a result of their journey evil has been banished: a mythological serpent is "frightened" and flees the scene. This interpretation of the final episode—which would make Head's experience of the "action of mercy" far less ambiguous and thus more in keeping with Crawford's and Perreault's arguments about the story—is supported by the fact that Head's original moral terms appear to be affirmed by Nelson's repudiation of urban life.

However, the idea that Nelson and Head's journey conquers evil is qualified by the final scene's irony, for the reconciled and ostensibly enlightened characters have become one with the retreating, serpentine train. Rather than a form of victory, their return home is represented as akin to evil's retreat; if evil withdraws in the story, the characters who ostensibly attain a state of redemption withdraw in its company. Their shared way of seeing the "artificial nigger" thus amounts to a serpentine form of self-deception, the narrative irony signaling that they are alienated or banished rather than redeemed. In light of this irony, whatever communion Nelson and Head achieve is associated with perdition. Indeed, if intersubjective communication, as Collins (1952: 33) suggests, is "upheld because of the possibility of intending the same world of objects and because of sharing in the common type of universal consciousness," O'Connor's story queries the exclusions on which a purportedly "universal consciousness" is constituted. Their shared way of reading the world turns out to be symbolically and racially violent.

Critical of the veil that religion can provide to white supremacy, this scene of communion is also decisively metafictional, for it is the *representational fiction* of "the plaster figure of a Negro" that reconciles Head

and Nelson, in a moment framed as a scene of reading: they “stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery” (*GM* 130). Where the observations of the world from the train were mediated through their own reflected self-images, this scene of reading presents a seemingly direct confrontation. But it is not so much the givenness of the world as the *fictional object* of the “artificial nigger” that becomes the medium of “mercy” for the grandfather. Fiction is here the spur, not the solution, for Head’s racist imaginary, as it is the direct experience of a dubious fictional object that underwrites an artificial experience of redemption, an emphasis on *artifice* foregrounded by the story’s title. This final scene of reading thus suggests that it is *fiction* (not just religion or bigoted intersubjectivity) that can sanction forms of discrimination. In other words, the possibilities of fiction become the subject of irony.

The metafictional irony of this scene of reading exemplifies one writer’s sense of the ambivalent possibilities of fiction within the postwar literary marketplace. Situating the story’s irony in mutually interrogating registers—as an institutional gesture *and* as a literary formation spanning epochs—further complicates these possibilities by partially disentangling irony from the self-constituting activities of the creative writing program, or at least by entangling it within cultural, political, and material forces of a much longer span. What’s more, these multiple registers pose a problem for how critics can understand their own disciplinary practices, requiring that critics layer explanatory frameworks not neatly accounted for in a historically bounded theory of institutions and systems. The complex relation of O’Connor’s irony to institutionality, in other words, prompts us to hold theoretical commitments that run across mutually interrogating registers. Neither of the registers for understanding the story’s irony can by itself resolve the interpretive problems posed by its metafictional end.

Rather than simply adopting a literary strategy promoted by Empson, Brooks, and Ransom, “The Artificial Nigger”’s self-questioning casts suspicion on the types of empathy and inherent goodness that the New Critics associated with fictional representation and the practices of critical reading. Even as “gazing” at the fiction of the “Negro” unites Nelson and Head, their shared reading seems to effect a self-deceiving and exclusionary “mercy,” a moment hard to understand as an instance of universal literary merit. In this light, irony and artifice in “The Artificial Nigger” raise questions about the value of fiction as an institution, particularly as the production of fiction seems bound up with forms of discrimination. Rather than constituting the “system,” irony here

questions the social possibilities that inhere within systems of fictional representation.

The cynical reading of O'Connor's ironizing would hold that fictional representations only affirm what we already believe to be true or sacred, as is the case for Nelson and his grandfather: when we read the world, we never escape the mediation of the ghostly images of our selves. But beyond such a reading, the irony that it is a fictional representation that unites the two readers in the story suggests—with Heidegger—that thought is guided by what is sought. In other words, O'Connor's story positions assumptions about the nature of being as preceding interpretation: this is consistent with the existentialist thought of Kierkegaard and the phenomenological method of Sartre, but it isn't unique to them. As O'Connor's irony prompts readers to interrogate the workings of fiction, it also invites interrogation of the ways we evaluate those workings. One might wonder if this teleological prompting is a kind of writerly sleight-of-hand: veil the fictional machinery but privilege the philosophical payoff. Nonetheless, there's reason enough for pause when we as critics "think" irony while the very issue of "thought" is being called into question by the ironic text.

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Notes

1. While there are important historical differences between phenomenology and existentialism, James Edie (1964: 115n4) notes that existentialism "is coming to have practically the same meaning as 'phenomenology'" in the United States. O'Connor's wide reading in European existentialism and

use of key phenomenological strategies bears this theory out; even if she disagreed with Sartre's atheism, she felt that existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre posed the right philosophical problems. For example, O'Connor directed a group of Catholics studying "Modern Literature" to Sartre's writing, despite the fact that he was "on the Index," or the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (HB 263). She also spoke highly of Sartre's "stature" (100) among modern thinkers. Indeed, in the depiction of her protagonists' confrontation with the idea of race in the "The Artificial Nigger," O'Connor considers many of Sartre's ideas about "consciousness confronting itself" (Sartre 2007: 40), as this essay later demonstrates.

2. For an earlier account that also represents how Hegel was interpreted in this period, see Muirhead 1928: 226. While the concept of phenomenology was present, it differs radically from the way mid-twentieth-century philosophers such as Marvin Farber (1943) use the term.

3. William Barrett (1958), a professor of philosophy at NYU, is an obvious exception. As Bruce Wilshire (1993: 77–78) explains, Barrett was "profoundly critical of the turn taken by professional academic philosophy in his lifetime, and could never identify wholly with it."

4. For example, while Farber criticized many aspects of Husserl's work, in *The Foundation of Phenomenology: Edmund Husserl and the Quest for a Rigorous Science of Philosophy* (1943) he also adapts Husserl's scientific aspirations.

5. As another version of this rejection of the norms of professional philosophy, Michael LeMahieu (2013: 52–85) demonstrates the "negative appearance" of logical positivism in O'Connor's fiction, particularly the story "Good Country People," which is collected in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*.

6. McGurl (2009: 48) describes this reflexivity about literary form as "autopoiesis," a term he borrows from systems theory and glosses as "a necessary component of any system's self-constitution." Those mechanisms that contribute to the production and continued operation of a system are autopoietic.

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