

Fertility and Untranslatability in Flannery O'Connor's "Greenleaf"

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the female melancholic subject's failed memorization and mourning in relation to the dead person in Flannery O'Connor's story "Greenleaf." Jean Laplanche considers mourning to be the subject's translations, de-translations, and retranslations of the other person's unconscious message, which is deposited in the subject's mind like a foreign body; mourning, then, largely involves the subject's repeated memorizations of the dead person. With reference to Laplanche's theory, this study investigates the paradoxical desire of O'Connor's melancholic mourner, Mrs. May, for unweaving the memories of the dead husband, and her unwillingness to entangle the past for fear of disclosing the less than desirable aspect of the dead. While the melancholic subject vainly wallows in unsuccessful translations of her unstable memories of the dead husband, which have already become fused with her own biographical history, she forms strong defensive mechanisms against a variety of invading agents, such as her hired help and a scrub bull, that are likely to reactivate her full memorization. In this sense, fertility is a symbol of Mrs. May's unwanted yet uncontrollably proliferating memories of the dead husband. Moreover, the irretrievability of any "authentic" memories regarding the lost person determines the perpetuated untranslatability of the foreign body in O'Connor's melancholic mourner.

Keywords: Flannery O'Connor, untranslatability, "Greenleaf," mourning, foreign body

Flannery O'Connor is skillful at simultaneously seducing and persecuting her characters with a foreign body and a covertly expected invader. Along with the foreign body and invader comes the hint of a revelation, which is nonetheless never quite illuminated. Visible illness, disability, stranger, doubling figure, and even intrusive animals are all capable of assuming the role of foreign body or uncanny invader. Freud writes, "We presume that the psychological trauma- or more precisely the memory of the trauma- acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must be continued to be regarded as an agent that is still at work" (SE II, 1893, p. 6). In Freud's succeeding work, the foreign body serves as memories of a traumatic episode of loss in one's life. If the foreign body cannot be scrutinized from within, it will return in the form of an uncanny external force. As illustrated by Freudian aesthetic of mourning, a dead object which is never really dead brings out the full dynamic of the subject's emotional turmoil. Despite its apparent invisibility, the foreign body permeates O'Connor's widowed women's surrealist dramas. Having a life of its own, it can moreover be highlighted by all kinds of mysterious invading agents. Indeed, O'Connor's protagonists have an intimate kinship with the invader: they peep at, listen to, or wait for some forms of revelation from it so as to confront their foreign body. This uncanny confrontation prompts them to embark on an unconscious quest through grappling with past memories, wants and grief. For a host of characters who are unaware of their traumatic psychic reality such as Ruby of "A Stroke of Good Fortune," Mrs. McIntyre of "The Displaced Person," and Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation," encountering the other triggers an attempt at memorization and mourning. Yet there is almost always a dimension of absolute unknowability and animosity to the foreign body awaiting to be resurrected by the invading agent. Like Kafka's characters who are haunted by the feeling that they have already been abandoned by the law and seek an answer in vain, O'Connor's anxious characters covertly search for memories they unconsciously know are irredeemable, and mourn a person toward whom they hold an ambivalent attitude. Exploring the protagonist's failed memorization and mourning in relation to the invading other, this short study attempts to investigate the enigmatic message of the dead in the mourner's unconscious memories and its untranslatability in O'Connor's short story "Greenleaf."

The unconscious memories of the dead in O'Connor's work corresponds to the other-centered metapsychology formulated by psychoanalytic theorist Jean Laplanche. The foreign body or the enigmatic signifier is for Laplanche the traumatic product of the transmission of the other person's unconscious wishes into the unconscious of the vulnerable subject; after the subject's initial failure of translation, it is subject to repression and becomes the residual deposit that will be reactivated at a later stage in the unconscious. Laplanche even attributes the untranslatable message from the other to the genesis of the unconscious: "far from being my kernel, (the unconscious) is the other implanted in me, the metabolized product of the other in me: forever an 'internal foreign body'" (1998, p. 256). The otherness of the unconscious therefore dictates that it exerts the power of seduction, persecution and revelation. Maintaining that "the human being is...a self-translating and self-theorizing being" (Laplanche, 1989, p. 131), Laplanche places emphasis on human beings' continual translations of the other's message, its belated realization, and proneness to revision. Laplanche's explication of the unconscious may be too radical to be realistic; however, if we substitute the unconscious with unconscious memories, this theory is of considerable usefulness to the exploration of the instability of one's traumatic memories regarding a lost person.

Laplanche also relies on the theoretical model of translation, detranslation and retranslation for his elaboration on mourning. Alluding to the story of Penelope in *The Odyssey*, who weaves the cloth in daytime and unweaves it at night so as to block her suitors' advance while Ulysses is rumored to be dead, Laplanche notes that the same word can denote "analyzing,"

“unweaving” and “undoing” in the Greek text. He argues that since Penelope unties her finished work in order to weave a new fabric, her mourning resembles psychoanalysis. Both dissolve old materials to create new knots and novel translations; and analysis is especially “a movement toward the past, a going back over... along the thread of the unconscious of the other” (1998, pp. 251–258). Laplanche remarks that “for the person in mourning, the message has never been adequately understood, never listened to enough. Mourning is hardly without the question: what would he be saying now” (Ibid., p. 254). But Laplanche’s approach neglects the fact that inquiry into the other’s message is inseparable from memorization: only through filling in the gaps of the enigmatic message with her memorization of the lost object, and thus establishing a dependable referent, can the subject reestablish her subjectivity impaired by trauma. Penelope’s work of weaving and unweaving precisely recalls the difficult memorization in mourning. Despite her daytime ritual, she resumes her imaginary dialogue with the supposedly dead at night by annulling the previous healing effort and reopening the wound, thereby perpetuating the disturbing undecidability of the other’s message as well as the self. With Ulysses the crafty object of loss and memorization transforming from seducer, persecutor to enlightener who finally reveals his identity, the melancholic Penelope is trapped in ceaseless attempts at memorization and translations.

One of the most important persons of loss in O’Connor dates back to the husband. The dead patriarch is a paradoxical figure whose powerful presence is more strongly felt by his recreation in the wife’s reminiscence, his genetic influence on the children, and the intimidating landscape permeated with supernatural imagery. Although the husband is oftentimes already dead before the family crisis unfolds, his omnipresent shadows show the persisting impact of traumatic memories, just as the return of the repressed exerts mental control over his wife. Absence therefore provides a more compelling presence infinitely strengthened by the permeability of the living person’s affective mapping. Even though the husband may be unappealing and morally dubious, he inspires a mixture of attachment and resentment, for he represents the lost power once capable of sustaining traditional social order. Ideally, the mourning wife could empower herself by identifying with his delusional potency. Her anxious helplessness is thus perpetuated through continuing to be hypnotized by fragmented memories, and imaginary communication with the ghost as well as the the agent of the deceased.

Unconscious yearning for memorization and mourning is an important character trait in O’Connor’s widowed women characters. Yet, since the completion of mourning requires full reconciliation with past memories and reconstruction of one’s autobiographical self, these women hardly accomplish their goal. Mrs. May in “Greenleaf” is an illustrative example. As the narrator informs us, Mrs. May never quite escapes the shadow of geographical dislocation caused by the early demise of her husband, whose financial situation forces her to relocate from the city to the country, a plot evoking the role of Ulysses for Penelope. As a caricatured version of Penelope, Mrs. May cannot terminate her work on the fabric of excessive unconscious memory fragments of her late husband. But different from Penelope, she refrains from naming her husband, though the “other” is of vital importance to her mental equilibrium. Laplanche argues that the mourner keeps asking herself what the dead person has to say or wants to do with her. Indeed, such a question is uttered repeatedly in various disguises of aggressive, radical, and otherwise inexplicable actions by Mrs. May to an absent addressee who has supposedly left his message and bears the power of paternal law like Ulysses. But, to Mrs. May, her enigmatic message denies linguistic representation as a taboo of the dead, and instead gives rise to surrealistic speculations and fantasies. Therefore nonverbal encounters, solitary activities and recurring dreams hold their sway in her mundane life.

Nonetheless, the message, when fully memorized and interpreted, can be devastating. This is especially so since memorization of the dead can bring about unpleasant and screened aspect of that person. The death of Mrs. May's husband leaves her considerable financial difficulties. Decline among the southern rural social hierarchy after World War II and the prosperity of the formerly poor whites like Mr. Greenleaf's children exacerbate her sense of loss, which both originated from the demise of her husband. Moreover, Mrs. May's rare conscious reminiscence of her husband casts doubt on the state of their relationship when he is alive. As a result, she paradoxically both longs for memorization of her husband and simultaneously fears its consequence. Her defensive mechanisms bear a military quality manifested in such actions as unconscious clinging to weapons and weapon-like tools (knife, gun, stick); even the trees surrounding her pasture with "sharp sawtooth edge" (p. 511) seem to protect her from recognition of past traumas. However again, Mrs. May's ostensibly closed psychic border barely conceals a desire for openness. Her anxiety over the materialistic transgression of the Greenleafs and the symbolic invasion of the sun is overshadowed by her compulsive obsession with exactly such end-of-world scenarios. This incongruity is precisely reflective of her ambiguous attitude toward the memories of her husband as the foreign body and a host of uncanny invaders, who may be an embodiment of her husband, a divine agent, or a demonic force. Her fifteen years of farm work is also paradoxically both incompletable work of memorization and the endeavor of hampering the revelation of the dead's message, so that the ambivalent law ensuring the stupor of her life can remain desired yet safely unapproachable. Such a self-contradictory struggle highlights the wrestling between her fear of self-knowledge, and longing for unknotting, detranslation and reweaving, to map out her unconscious memories and emotions through mourning.

The excess of dislocated messages without a legitimized translation is reflected in the imagery of fertility in the story. Mrs. May's land, herd, family and her own body all exhibit the unbridled growth of existential uncertainties and frantic imaginations in the face of the shrinking justifiability of her ethical superiority. As the only gift from the dead husband, the land incarnates his body merged with hers, and also the tomb that shields his ambiguous intention. As such, the embodied land has to surpass the reach of violation. Strenuously laboring on the fields ensures the order of the land, but also serves as an act of self-protection. Like Joy/Hulgar in "Good Country People" who meticulously cares for her wooden leg, Mrs. May carries a stick with her while inspecting her field in case of snakes. The process of translation, detranslation and repression, however, results in yet more accumulations of freely-associated memories externalized in dramatic forms. Also like Joy/Hulga, Mrs. May does not and is unwilling to understand the messages inscribed on her body. The "green rubber curlers" that "spouted neatly over her forehead" (O'Connor, 1988, p. 501) display a parallel between natural exuberance and mental knots. Yet she ignores these outward exhibitions of emotional memories. All of these imageries assume the features of fecundity of undesired memories.

The difference between mourning and melancholia, according to Freud, is that the subject of the former is able to withdraw her psychic energy from the object of loss and invest it in a new object, while the melancholic is persistently attached to the lost object. Also, mourning is a highly ritualized activity with a beginning and end, whereas melancholia involves instability of forms and compulsive repetitions. Mrs. Greenleaf, an abiding invader of her property in Mrs. May's view, illustrates these differences; and her grotesque "prayer healing," supposedly capable of casting light on Mrs. May's own foreign body, enables her to become an invading agent for Mrs. May. In her ritual, Mrs. Greenleaf buries stories of disasters and gossips she cuts off from newspapers into a hole, lies in the dirt, "swayed back and forth" (p. 506) with face full of dirt and tears, and fervently prays to Christ. Unlike Penelope's weaving work without a

nodal point, the burial ritual marks a thorough metabolization, and her ecstatic “communication” with Christ marks the consummation or transcendence of translations. Mrs. Greenleaf’s irrational healing also echoes the utter indecidability of the dead’s enigmatic message in the mourner’s unconscious memories.

Interestingly, Mrs. Greenleaf also serves as a comical allusion to Our Mother of Sorrows, or *Mater Dolorosa*, who in popular Catholic imagery is sorrowful and anguished with her heart pierced by seven daggers or by thorns. Apart from being Christ’s mother, Virgin Mary is Christ’s wife and daughter as well. Hence, Mrs. Greenleaf’s ritual conjures up the image of Our Mother of Sorrows mourning over Christ’s tomb, which is the container carrying her object of grief, as well as her desire. The tears and dirt on Mrs. Greenleaf’s face recalls Julia Kristeva’s remark that starting from the eleventh century till its peak in the fourteenth century, “milk and tears became the privileged signs of the *Mater Dolorosa*” (1987, p. 249) in the West. Mrs. Greenleaf’s tears remind us of the blood of wounding, the female body’s merging with the son/husband/father’s corpse. The dirt on her face, on the other hand, suggests the milk of fertility, which ironically comes from Mrs. May’s land and body, thereby again reinforcing her role as a messenger of Mrs. May’s dead husband. Contrastingly, although Mrs. May is also implicitly compared to Virgin Mary in the story, her mourning attempt is partly thwarted by her avoidance of authentic emotional release. She refuses to acknowledge the full memories that caused her melancholia and does not desire a definite ending in her contemplation on her foreign body. Hence, she can never quite finish the process of detranslations and retranslation, and her failed mourning takes the form of repeated hearing, watching, worrying and remembering.

But the scrub bull is the most evident invading agent in the story. Critics have noted the deliberateness of Mrs. May’s waiting regarding the scrub bull. As Bruce Gentry notes, “Despite all her protests that she wishes to be rid of the bull, Mrs. May never quite takes the action that would force its removal.” (1986, p. 60) When the bull charges toward her toward the end, Mrs. May merely stares at it “at if she could not decide at once what his intention was” (O’Connor, 1988, p. 523). Such passive “waiting” bears resemblance to pregnancy, which blurs the boundaries between the subject in mourning and her foreign body within. As a matter of fact, both the narrator and Mrs. May’s interior monologues indicate that ever since the beginning of the story, when she hears the sounds of the bull in her dream, she has been expecting her haunting memories of the husband to be ultimately translated with the aid of the animal as a ghostly agent, a seductive invader likely to reveal to her the original unconscious message of her husband, and perhaps of God. Her implicit expectation therefore endows the bull’s digestive noises with deceptive magic of metabolization and revelation. However, the bull’s chewing sound provides scant cues of a revelation- its sound without language can at best reside in the realm of the imaginary capable of evoking a variety of phantasmal illusions appearing and disappearing at will. Thus, Mrs. May’s waiting for “delivery” with the presence of the revealing invader is doomed to end up being a game of abortion.

The bull itself provides multiple opportunities for interpretation. Among other possibilities, ample evidence suggests that the bull is evocative of Mrs. May’s sons, who inherited their father’s violent temperament. This family affinity is in keeping with the often striking resemblance between fathers and sons in O’Connor’s other fictional work. Indeed, the father figure in O’Connor produces his child as an embodiment of his symptoms, and a carrier of his unconscious wishes. Biological determinism is manifested in his child via disease, deformity, and even madness. On the other hand, the child, bearing the peril of family repetition, increasingly imitates his father – even though he resents him – by alienating the mother.

Apparently lacking in the husband's "wise blood," the widowed women are oftentimes excluded from a recovered father-child dyad and have to bear the consequence of the child's emotional denunciation. They constantly face the danger of seeing ruthless abandonment restaged by their beloved child, who may completely shatter the already precarious mother-child relationship.

Therefore it is not surprising that Mrs. May's surly and disdainful sons' nasty fight at home shows an "ugly family resemblance" (O'Connor, 1988, p. 517) in addition to masculine violence. In all probability, the bull reminds Mrs. May of the potential treachery in her sons, which may resemble the "treachery" of her husband, who left her virtually nothing upon death. Moreover, when Mrs. May sees the bull on the first night, she intuitively assumes that it belongs to a "nigger," and Scofield sells insurance to African Americans, a job she considers socially inferior; her other son Wesley's bitter derision of Mrs. May hurts her like a "knife edge", which ironically evokes Our Lady of Sorrows pierced by daggers in the heart. Most dramatically, In Mrs. May's dream, she is killed by the sun racing downward like a bullet. The dream seems to send her the message that the sons will destroy her someday, which underscores her latent fear of being totally betrayed and abandoned by her sons.

Additionally, the negative implications of feeding are remarkable in the story. The bull bears resemblance to an infant drinking milk when it is alone near Mrs. May's house at night, and emits the sounds of "steady rhythmic chewing" (p. 501). Since Mrs. May's land is likened to her shared body with her husband, the bull as the continuum of her sons and husband is undeniably feeding on Mrs. May fecundity of traumatic past memories. "Conscious in her sleep that something was eating one wall of the house" (Ibid.), Mrs. May likens the bull's consumption of her grass to cannibalistic devouring that will finally consume everything including humans, except for the Greenleaves. But as a matter of fact, it is her boys that are "devouring" her at home without gratitude, an act which may recall her late husband's similarly "devouring" of the family's financial foundation. Moreover, Mrs. May and her sons' rancorous conversations all happen at the dinner table; and as the narrator tells us, Mrs. May "never ate breakfast but she sat with them to see that they had what they wanted" (O'Connor, 1988, p. 504). Kristeva's writing on Virgin Mary's "spiritualized" body corresponds to Mrs. May's maternal role: "the Virgin obstructs the desire for murder or devouring by means a strong oral cathexis (the breast), valorization of pain (the sob), and incitement to replace the sexed body with the ear of understanding" (1987, p. 257). As such, Mrs. May the feeder of and listener to aggressive children's desire bears ironic resemblance to Our Mother of Sorrows, who mourns both her son and husband's death.

O'Connor has probably incorporated more than one religious and literary source in the imagery of the bull, but the following lines in Psalm 22 cast light on the complex denotations of the bull:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest...Many bulls encompass me; strong bulls of Bashan surround me; they open wide their mouths at me, like a ravening and roaring lion.

Psalm 22 substantiates my argument that the bull reminds us of the irretrievability of the original source of traumatic memory once it has become an internal foreign body like a "splinter in the skin". Mrs. May, the woman in mourning, asks her uncanny invader a question, but ends up with still more knots than keys. The deceptiveness of the bull lies in its ubiquitous representability. Prior to its attack on Mrs. May, instead of performing the role of a seductive

lover, the bull assumes a childlike joyful and pampered look over the return of the mother; when it pierces Mrs. May through the chest, however, it again becomes “a wild tormented lover” (O’Connor, 1988, p. 523). The supernatural animal uncannily shifts in and out of different scenes. Mrs. May’s fragmented memories of her husband are likewise perpetually disjointed, attracting the attachment of new strings of disturbing memories, for it is “abandoned” by the primal scene of loss deliberately forgotten by her. Therefore the fertile foreign body is capable of evoking all kinds of translations, but all of them are postponed and eventually dismissed in the indeterminacy of recollections. It is like the golden idol that deceives and persecutes the passive worshipper with too many false unraveling moments and invalid answers. Due to this excess of referents, the subject’s memorization and mourning are irreversibly compromised.

Since the original sender of the message is absent, the foreign body left by him is merged with the subject’s own affective disposition. When Mrs. May “seemed...to bend over whispering some last discoveries into the animal’s ear” (O’Connor, 1988, p. 524) after being gored by the bull, the narrator does not specify to whom this “seeming” makes sense. Such ambiguity typical of the ending of O’Connor’s fiction again reminds us that the enigmatic message will meet with its ultimate untranslatability even after transference, and the event of translation itself will risk being rendered untranslatable. However, the other’s unconscious element, because of its transmissibility, gains a life of its own. The “yet-to-be-translated” in the endings is transferred to the readers, and thus reproduces an ever-growing enigma in the readers’ unconscious.

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