Marshall Bruce Gentry St. George Tucker Society, 27 July 2019

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**Reconsidering Astor and Sulk**

**in Flannery O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person”**

Abstract: This presentation follows up on “Criminal Neglect in Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction,” an article I published a couple of years ago, an article in which I examine, among other things, the bad behavior of various characters in O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person.” I label the priest, Father Flynn, usually considered a thoroughly admirable figure, as a character guilty of seriously neglecting his duties. Now I want to examine which characters in the story exhibit respectable behavior, and I find myself rethinking the African-American workers on Mrs. McIntyre’s farm, Astor and Sulk. O’Connor critics have tended to lump together the two African-American workers on the farm of Mrs. McIntyre in O’Connor’s “The Displaced Person” and to question the morality of both characters. However, I want to distinguish between the two characters here, in part as a matter of acknowledging their full humanity. The older man, Astor, is absent from the scene of the crime at the story’s climax, and this seems to me to be a clear sign that Astor is the most respectable of the story’s characters. Despite the irony of his name—an allusion to one of America’s richest and most powerful families—Astor, working from a position of near-powerlessness, does his best to survive within a corrupt system, and he does so with a respectable amount of concern for other people on the farm. The farm in O’Connor’s story is corrupt, but Astor tries to save the people, and even the peacocks, who live there. His displacement at the story’s end is tragic. While the younger worker, Sulk, is manipulated toward allowing the murder of the DP, Mr. Guizac, he too deserves more respect that he usually receives. Under the influence of one of my GCSU graduate students, Michael Faulknor, I have started to rethink Sulk’s behavior. He has even less power than Astor does, and it is possible to read the story as suggesting that he acts with forgiveness and compassion, even if he does not act heroically in the story’s climactic scene.

**Marshall Bruce Gentry** is Professor of English at Georgia College and Editor of the *Flannery O’Connor Review*. He is the author of *Flannery O’Connor’s Religion of the Grotesque*, editor of *The Cartoons of Flannery O’Connor at Georgia College*, and co-editor of *At Home with Flannery O’Connor: An Oral History*. Due out in September is *Approaches to Teaching the Works of Flannery O’Connor*, which Gentry is co-editing, with Robert Donahoo, for MLA. His articles on O’Connor appear in *The Centrality of Crime Fiction in American Literary Culture*, *Flannery O’Connor in the Age of Terrorism*, Wise Blood: *A Re-Consideration*, *Flannery O’Connor’s Radical Reality*, etc. Gentry was twice co-director for NEH Summer Institutes; each institute brought 24 college teachers to Milledgeville for a month of O’Connor boot camp. Gentry has also directed four academic conferences at Georgia College on O’Connor, and he is planning a conference for Savannah in Feb. 2021.