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**«УРОЖАЙ» СЕМЕНА АВТОРСКОГО ТВОРЧЕСТВА  
«THE CROP»: DISSEMINATING THE WRITER'S SEEDS****Б. Пернель  
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This paper suggests a deconstructionist approach of O'Connor's story and discusses the possibilities and conditions required to "start" a text according to the theories of French philosopher Jacques Derrida. In that perspective, the notion of an impossible and always deferred beginning calls into question the traditional logocentric vision of writing mainly based on *arché* and *eschaton* and *telos*, as well as the concept of presence as origin upholding it. Reflecting on the general decentring at work in the text, the article explores one aspect of the nature of a "text" as a fabric of traces and admits the principle of Derrida's concept of dissemination as the main structure that organizes it, and takes it as the literal and metaphorical seed or semen of the title.

*Key words:* American literature; dissemination; différance; deconstruction; Derrida; O'Connor Flannery.

**Introduction**

First written in February 1946, "The Crop" was part of O'Connor's MFA. As such, this early work constitutes nearly a beginning or a near origin, a point which will appear as central in this reading of the story. Although it already gave more than a glimpse of the stylistic achievement that she was later to develop in her mature texts, the story was deemed to be "UNPUBLISHABLE" in 1953 by F. O'Connor herself. In this supposedly flawed work then, the young O'Connor derides a "bad", didactic would-be writer (Miss Willerton) who proves unable to write a story (though she fancies herself a good writer); quite unsurprisingly, it is set in the very familiar Southern background of her home, where she is described in her everyday life and domestic chores, including that of crumbing the kitchen table; ironically, the first thing that the protagonist seems to harvest is actually a crop of crumbs!

But Willie (as she soon appears to be called) has a much more serious task to perform (and to complete): that of "writing a story". Retiring to her desk in order to start her writer's work, very conventionally, she has to "think of a subject to write about." But in that stereotyped situation Miss Willerton soon faces the well-known "writer's block": "That was always the hardest part of writing a story, she always said. She spent more time thinking of something to write about than she did writing" [10. P. 33].

From the outset, the issue of writing clearly appears as a major question in this short-story, and more specifically, that of the failure of the writer, a figure in which many critics agree to find a significant part of Flannery O'Connor herself. For all its supposed flaws, this early work obviously displays much self-mockery here, and beyond the humour of the anecdotal, literal level, a deeper questioning comes up, namely the putting into question of a certain notion of the text and of writing: Miss Willerton's failed attempt clearly resorts to the conventional logocentric (even phallogocentric) conception of writing, based on the notion of center and origin. As such principles clearly cannot hold in "The Crop", the idea of the text and of writing in general must be reassessed, taking into account what Jacques Derrida calls *Dissemination*, as he exposes it in his seminal eponymous work.

The aim of this paper is then to suggest a deconstructionist approach of O'Connor's story, accepting the principle of dissemination as the main structure of the text, and taking it as the literal and metaphorical seed or semen that, after sowing, will yield the long-awaited "crop" of the title.

**1. How to start? The impossible beginning**

The logocentric, traditional conception of Western literature and more generally, of fiction writing, implicitly involves a conventional structure of the text, which very simply rests on the presence of a beginning and an ending. Such basic requirements, as simple as they may appear, nonetheless pose a major problem to Miss Willerton, who faces the well-known ordeal of the writer: how to start? Yet it seems that this plain but



crucial and indispensable step cannot be completed, and beginning the story clearly emerges as an impossible task to perform. Very logically, the first thing the writer has to do is to choose a good subject.

Miss Willerton discards topic after topic, starting with bakers, (rejected because of their lack of picturesqueness), moving on to teachers, which she also dismisses, as they make her feel peculiar and do not even raise any thought-provoking social issue, before she finally thinks of “sharecroppers”: “Sharecroppers!” A “semantic”, or at least connotative unity is suggested in the first lines of O’Connor’s fiction, quite noticeable since bakers are indirectly related to the crumbs that the main character has to collect in the opening page, as she harvests a crop of bread crumbs ( i.e. made by the bakers that she had turned down as an inappropriate subject matter). The other possible topic, “teachers”, also conveys an implicit connection with the same field, through the mention of the name of the college she attended: “Willowpool Female Seminary, Miss Willerton remembered. She didn’t like the phrase, Willowpool Female Seminary – it sounded biological” [10. P.34].

Miss Willerton also makes it clear that the problem is the “phrase” itself, as the etymology of the word “Seminary” connects to the “Seed”/ “semen” field:

Seminar : Latin *seminarium* nursery ( Webster).

Semen : from Latin, seed, semen ( Webster).

This may also account for the unease of the not-so-young “Miss” Willerton (44 years old as she herself declares in the story), who also confesses that “*Men teachers made [her] feel as if she were going to mispronounce something*” [10. P. 34]. Another main issue appears too: that of sexual difference, and of the handling of sexuality in fiction writing.

The final choice of the novice writer, “sharecroppers”, deserves to be commented: “Miss Willerton had never been intimately connected with sharecroppers but, she reflected, they would make as arty a subject as any”; once again, the word itself shows the full scope of its significance: according to Webster’s dictionary, a sharecropper is “*a farmer especially in the southern U.S. who raises crops for the owner of a piece of land and is paid a portion of the money from the sale of the crops.*”

Beyond the superficial anecdote and funny expression of a writer’s shortcomings, such an emphasis on the “theme” conveys a deeper significance in terms of textual/ formal structure of the text. Derrida explores and analyses the issue of theme (“thème”) in *Dissemination*, where he defines the theme as a “ nuclear unit of meaning, posed there before the eye, present outside of its signifier and referring only to itself ” [3, P. 250]. Such a conception of the theme then entails a unity and “fixity” of meaning in all its expression. According to Derrida, it is “the reappropriation of the seed within presence” [3. P. 351].

In other words, the theme is what allows the re-introduction of “presence”, conveyed through the existence of a reassuring center of meaning, as it constitutes a founding structure which provides a stable basis to the text to come. The ideal subject or perfect “theme” must then allow the emerging of the first sentence, another crucial element in the making of what is considered “good writing”, a central element Miss Willerton desperately needs to “build her story up”. Yet the difficulties she faces when she comes to write a story, and significantly through strict observation of the academic rules of creative writing, tend to display the impossibility of a beginning, conceived as “origin”, in terms of “presence without difference” [5. P. 215], as an ideal moment of pure, unmediated ‘firstness’.

So, for Derrida there is no origin except originary difference; everything begins then in representation, **as** representation, and can never leave this behind. Being part of the “logic of identity”, of “the principle of classical ontology”, representation is a perfect example of secondariness since representation is always the representation of a presence that comes first: “there is nothing outside of the text (...) there is no outside-text” [5, P. 158]. We may conclude that there is nothing outside originary difference or the work of supplementarity, nothing outside ‘the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified’ (*ibid.*). The impossible beginning of Miss Willerton’s story and the thorough choice of subject conspicuously focus on the notion introduced by the title itself: “The Crop”. Obviously, the harvest which is at the center of the story is human, developing from the collecting of physical bread crumbs, to the birth (as ad-venir or advent ) of a child, even if the “gain” of a baby entails the literal and literary loss of the crop i.e. of the text which is “in progress”, but which will never “come”, nor even “crop up”!

## 2. Dissemination and the deconstruction of phallogocentrism

It becomes clear then that the absence of a singular origin means that it is impossible to begin, that any beginning comes “after” as a supplement, so that any beginning is a quotation. As everything is text, and because there is nothing that is prior to textuality, then really there is no such thing as representation. A text is not, for Derrida, the imitation of a presence; instead presence is an effect of textuality.

Writing therefore cannot come from any type of begetting nor insemination, it cannot nor from any father-like origin: it can only be produced by the law of dissemination (as a movement of constant shifting) which underlines at the same time the “secondariness” of the text: it is rather an echo a fable, a pure mechanism



which does not refer to anything outside itself.

Writing thus starts with a decentring of the formerly “sacred” origin, conceived as Logos, with all its traditional connotations of truth and meaning, as well as the religious, onto-theological significance of the term: “In the beginning was the Word” (or Logos), as St John’s Gospel affirms.

O’Connor critics have often focused on then theological aspect of her texts, emphasizing the ethical aspect of her work, her deep Catholic faith centered on the relation Man/ God which metaphorically leads to a more metaphysical reflection about a larger relationship including “the Other”, which in Derridean perspective could come down to his famous phrase “inventing the other”. This raises a major issue: what is “invention”, or creation ?

The Bible provides a first logocentric answer, based on the divine power of the Word; but O’Connor’s story deals with a much humbler type of beginning – introducing a beginner, significantly and ironically named “Willie”, a nickname whose strong sexual inuendo cannot be missed. The “phallic” pun is obvious, and as Flannery O’ Connor hardly ever resorted to sexuality in her texts, unless a right amount of sex would serve to develop the story, or convey the meaning, we may infer that this has some importance in the whole economy of her story. The phallic pun on the name of the female writer sends us back to the formerly mentioned “semen/ seed” cluster, together with the question of insemination / dissemination as a phallic movement, the scattering of the seeds both of a future harvest and of a text to come, but also of a de-construction of the notion of “center” of meaning (Derrida).

The question of dissemination must be mentioned here, and the opening sentence of *Dissemination* reads: “This (therefore) will not have been a book.” As Barbara Johnson notes in her introduction to her translation of Derrida’s work, the sentence is written in the future perfect tense, as to have a determined meaning. Dissemination usually means to scatter and to sow, but what dissemination ‘means’ in (and as) *Dissemination* is not reducible to that. No doubt something (a sense, perhaps, or the sense of a sense) is ‘sown’ here, but all the same the meaning of the sentence is ‘scattered’ in several directions at once. This – a plurivocal drive or energy – discloses not so much a theme or an intending consciousness, or a particular stylistic approach, but a force within writing itself.

Allegorical mentions of this disseminating process or movement appear in “The Crop”, where the different threads and elements introduced from the very start, even in the failed lead sentence, interweave or at least connect the different ties of motherhood, artistry, and literature as the crop; once the all too obvious stereotypes of writing as metaphorical birth (“the child must have a good start”, the narrator declares) are overcome and the main principle of decentring has been accepted, the question yet remains : how to start ? Can a story “start” really, and be truly “original” ? It clearly cannot, since there is always a “before”, a supplement, and the concept of the text itself is called into question.

In *Dissemination*, Derrida defines the text as first and foremost a texture, a fabric:

*“A text is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” [2. P. 84].*

Hence a text is a “fabric of traces”, governed by the logic of non-presence, which endlessly refers to other texts, in other words, to contexts:

The presence of other “texts” in “The Crop” shows through a number of hinted allusions to other texts, resorting to intertextuality or hypertextuality, as G. Genette defined them in his *Palimpsests* essay:

Intertextuality is all that sets the text in a relationship, whether obvious or concealed, with other texts.” Further, the author identifies five types of transtextual relationships. Intertextuality is the actual presence of one text within another, by way of such mechanisms as quoting, plagiarism, and allusion.

Hypertextuality is the proper subject of *Palimpsest*. Hypertextuality refers to “any relationship uniting a text B (which I shall call the hypertext) to an earlier text A (I shall, of course, call it the hypotext), upon which it is grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary; hypertextual possibilities include playful transformation (parody), satirical transformation (travesty), serious transformation (transposition), playful imitation (pastiche), satirical imitation (caricature).

This concept of the text as secondary (and as essentially differing) leads us to re-think the concept of reference, and also that of the text as doubling.

The first major and blatant intertext is that of the Bible, supposedly the “original” book according to the Christian dogma, but itself a book whose mysterious origin seems to be lost forever !

The reference to crop and seeds indirectly alludes to St Mark’s Gospel:

26 And he said, So is the kingdom of God, as if a man should **cast seed into the ground**;  
27 And should sleep, and rise night and day, and the seed should spring and grow up, he knoweth not how.

28 For the earth bringeth forth fruit of herself; first the blade, then **the ear**, after that the full corn in **the ear**.

29 But when the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come.

(Mark 4:26-29)



Beyond the agricultural context of sharecropping, sowing, reaping then garnering (as the name of “old Garner” seems to suggest), the story itself starts with a title which points rather to the end and result of a process which has never actually begun. The first lines of the text display the typical *in medias res* beginning O’Connor will favor in her later fiction, a good illustration of Derrida’s declaration :

“To write is to have the passion of the origin” [6, P. 372] and to research “arché, eschaton and telos” Derrida goes on, in an essentially mimetic text which aims at reflecting an original truth. But in the absence of a “source” the logic of supplement prevails, and entails the disruption of what is usually understood by “end” or “beginning”. As there is “nothing outside text” [5, P.158], all is textuality and there is nothing outside context: therefore, any beginning is a quotation. This rule seems to apply to O’Connor’s text, as well as to her main character’s aborted story :

A number of echoes and allusions to other texts show through O’Connor’s lines, on a rather palimpsestic mode. Her use of narrative technique, already insisting on the exclusion of “telling” and emphasizing the necessity of “showing” [11, PP. 75-76] may account for her choice in terms of narrative mode, but it also proves oddly reminiscent of Woolf’s technique in *Mrs Dalloway*, particularly in the opening paragraph of the story. More generally the literary context of Faulkner’s *South*, or even Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* may be mentioned, with Willerton’s allusions to Lot Motun and his wife’s fat ankles and “muddy-coloured” eyes, a possible variation of Ma Joad’s “hazel eyes”. Incidentally Miss Willerton explains her writing technique in what she likes to call “a literary venture”, relying on her strong belief in “phonetic art”. She exposes her theory “to a group at the United Daughters of the Colonies”, which is phonetically very similar to the title of K. Mansfield’s short-story “The Daughters of the Late Colonel” (1922); moreover, the two protagonists of this text are shown as replying to a huge number of letters of condolence after the decease of their father, while one of the young girls feels sorry for the little mouse they’ve heard because “there aren’t any crumbs”.

Coming back to the biblical intertext, it expands when it comes to the difficult question of names and naming: Miss Willerton’s main protagonist is called Lot Motun, with no hesitation. Lot (in Hebrew; “veil” or “covering”) is mentioned in the *Book of Genesis* chapters 11–14 and 19, in the well-known episodes of his flight from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, during which his wife was turned into a pillar of salt, and of the seduction by his daughters.

The presumptive incest between Lot and his daughters has raised many theological questions, debates, and theories, but in O’Connor’s fiction, it could be related to Lot’s very ambiguous declaration “I have two Willies”. The phallic, inseminating principle emerges once again, and merges with the “seed/ semen” cluster, inseminating rather than disseminating in this case. But we may as well understand Lot’s declaration as metaphorically “unveiling” and revealing the absence of a single, true origin. The mention of “two willies” points to the underlying process of “doubling” (ironically applying to two females, as if to ironically suggest the end of phallogocentric system), as a loss (of the crop) which is in fact a gain: that of “two Willies”.

Another interesting similarity appears in both O’Connor’s story and in the Bible: Lot’s wife is not named, a narrative trick which allows “Willie” the writer to enter the text and become a character herself, yet this also raises another issue about the status of the author/ writer who turns into the reader of a text, of many intertexts before becoming part of the text in progress.

### 3. What is a text?

The very postmodern notion of loss-as-gain appears then in O’Connor’s story, as the clear impossibility to start, and to write a story using the traditional principles of arché and eschaton. How to write a text?

Through the many “doublings”, erasings, repetitions and Miss Willerton’s difficulties, the question of writing itself appears: on the one hand, the conception that the would-be writer evidences, i.e. a theory of writing based on logocentrism. In that perspective, “speech” is superior to writing (as her particular liking of what she calls “phonetic art” or “tonal quality” shows), and the visibility of “presence” is a fundamental, hence the clear emphasis on the eye supposed to “form a picture” which actually determines the success of the literary venture. On the other hand, the notion of a text that “disseminates”. This calls into question what “writing” and “literature” mean; disseminating is more a way of writing, which involves a certain disruption of the concept of literature, and the ideal form/ convention that should define it. Among others, dissemination rejects the concept of text as a unity (form, style) and the notion of “presence”, the idea it has its own identity. While quoting from another text, Willie’s obsession with the importance of the first sentence (also a satiric feature, as O’Connor’s work is famous for its first sentences), suggests the impossibility of a beginning, conceived as a new “start”, or a new text. “Writing is grafting”, Derrida declares in *Dissemination* (3, P. 395], as dissemination is a force within language already, before an author may be said to choose to write any particular book in a particular style.

Here O’Connor deliberately satirizes her own creative process, thus using the postmodernist concept of metafiction while remaining faithful to the old tradition of plot. Yet postmodern literary composition often involves deconstructionist devices, among which metafiction & metaconsciousness which problematize the author-reader relationship. By calling attention onto its own texture and mode of production, O’Connor’s story focuses on the issue of textuality and the notion of text. As a modernist writer, she would search to occupy spiritual and intellectual borderlands. This echoes (and even announces) the idea of deconstruction as



deliberately eccentric, and implies that writing means working in the margins: "marginal, fringe' cases... always constitute the most certain and most decisive indices wherever essential conditions are to be grasped"[2. P. 209].

The notion of author becomes more problematic: the author is included in the text - because there is nothing outside the text; he becomes himself or herself a text to be read, and can not longer be regarded as a governing presence. "... *what [deconstruction] calls into question is the presence of a fulfilled and actualised intentionality, adequate to itself and its contents*" [2. P. 202-203].

The common conception of the Author as a godlike, logocentric figure shifts, becomes more "marginal" (if seminal), and follows the force of dissemination. The "borders" seem to blur as Willie the writer mingles with Willie the character, who in turn produces a double or a copy of herself, "when late March came", i.e. a time of year which oddly echoes O'Connor's own birthdate, March 25th. The traditional notion of a text is deeply questioned, especially the notions of borders, frontiers, limits. Beyond the fantasy of Willerton, the underlying questioning that pervades the whole story could well be:

What is a text? Once again, Derrida's concept of "overrun" ("débordement") may be helpful in understanding the working of this text:

*"Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far (not submerging or drowning them in an undifferentiated homogeneity, but rather making them more complex, dividing and multiplying strokes and lines) - all the limits, everything that was to be set up in opposition to writing (speech, life, the world, the real, history, and what not, every field of reference- to body or mind, conscious or unconscious, politics, economics, and so forth.)* [2. P.84].

### Conclusion

The ironical, even satirical "crop" developed in O'Connor's story uses the misleading pretext of biblical, agricultural seeds and more biological semen. Although the author uses and refuses sex through the rejection of "passionate scenes", she strongly suggests the insemination process and an obvious phallic significance in her main character's name. Such conspicuous narrative "tricks", (strict application of the academic principle of the first sentence, characterization) resort to and focus on rather postmodern concerns, mainly the question of self-referentiality while O'Connor deliberately mocks the usual "exercises" in creative writing. Miss Willerton's failure in composing a text however raises crucial issues about what a text is: from the very beginning, in fact before any beginning – dissemination is then at play, such that every text 'will not have been a text', from the very first inking of an idea. Whatever it will have been when it is 'finished', or may have been since Willie's text remains in a state of utter incompleteness), it will not have been a text, or what is usually considered as such (i.e organized around a concept of unity). As the main force of writing and textuality in general, dissemination happens always in the middle of things, without origin or telos, before every beginning and past every end. What a writer "should" do is the main point here: What a text is, and how writing occurs; it is certainly no coincidence if Willie's artistic capabilities seem to develop when she gives up her "sharecropper" story, turning her back mentally to the "traditional", logocentric concept of a text : unlike Lot's Wife in the Bible she will not be turned into a pillar of salt, a frozen, rigid phallic column whose only remarkable feature lies in its *rigor mortis* ; but moving on to a new topic and new literary venture, "Willie" might finally manage to disseminate the crop of writer's "seeds" she had so thoroughly harvested.

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