



(Im)politeness strategies in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

Maurice Cronin
Paris Dauphine University

Flannery O'Connor's novels and short stories provide a fertile and mostly unploughed terrain for a study of politeness and impoliteness phenomena in modern fiction informed by the pragmatic perspective. Of particular interest for the literary pragmatist is the rich interactional potential of these phenomena at the level of communication between authors and readers. I propose to focus on a specific instance, namely the protagonist Hazel Motes' conspicuous and repeated acts of conversational impoliteness in the opening chapter of O'Connor's novel, *Wise Blood* (1952), because it provides an interesting opportunity to explore the vexed question of the relationship between "the [im]politeness *in*" and "the [im]politeness *of* literary texts" (Sell, *Literary Pragmatics* 1991: 217). The interactions portrayed in the first chapter of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor's first novel, do not merely serve to present Hazel Motes to readers, but also to negotiate O'Connor's public emergence as a novelist. I will show how Motes' repeated infringements of the norms of polite conversation mirror or refract the narrative stance with respect to readers' expectations regarding the conventions of modern realist novels (including the convention of the *in medias res* beginning), thereby providing a model of the relationship being constructed with readers in the textual opening.

Notwithstanding the fact that the cooperative principle is "hyperprotected" at the level of author/reader interaction" in the literary context (Pratt, *Toward A Speech Act Theory of Literary Discourse*: 215), using impoliteness to mediate that interaction represents a relatively high-risk "interactive gamble" (Sell, *ibid*: 220), especially for a young, unknown novelist. The tenor of O'Connor's "Author's Note" to the second edition of *Wise Blood* (1962)—for all intents and purposes an "ulterior authorial preface" (Genette, *Seuils*: 242)—suggests that the author's communicative intent was not recognized by many contemporary readers. The Author's Note involves a re-negotiation of the reading contract designed to ensure a more 'appropriate' response to or recognition of *Wise Blood*. Although O'Connor deploys politeness strategies implicitly acknowledging readers' negative and positive "face wants" to achieve her goal, the "note" also represents a rather risky interactive gamble. Whether we can say today that it has paid off or not is a moot point, attested by *Wise Blood's* still uncertain status in the literary canon.