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A Different Kind of Vision: The Critique of Consumerism in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

Nicholas L. Eilts
The University of Montana

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A DIFFERENT KIND OF VISION: THE CRITIQUE OF CONSUMERISM IN

FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S *WISE BLOOD*

By

NICHOLAS L. EILTS

B.A. English, Northern State University, Aberdeen, South Dakota, 2009

Thesis

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Approved by:

Sandy Ross, Dean of The Graduate School
Graduate School

Dr. Robert Baker, Chair
English Department

Dr. Christopher Knight
English Department

Dr. Marton Marko
Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures

Abstract Title

Chairperson: Dr. Robert Baker

In the tradition of Jon Lance Bacon and Steve Pinkerton, this work endeavors to show how Flannery O'Connor, along with her secular humanist contemporaries, voices a critique of modern American culture that depicts the conflicting elements of consumerism as detrimental to an individual's personal and social well-being. This study will focus on *Wise Blood*, in particular, as it represents a consumerist way of life as antithetical to a religious way of life. By illustrating the emptiness of materialism and the nihilism of consumerism, O'Connor hopes to persuade her readers that Christianity is a preferable alternative.

The body of this study has two parts. The first chapter, "Led By Ropes, Scents, and Dog Whistles," drawing on the language of cultural critics Marshal McLuhan, C. Wright Mills, and Vance Packard, explicates the novel's conflicting conceptions of wise blood. O'Connor juxtaposes an authentic wise blood defined by its drive for salvation with a parodic version that is simply an introjection of the promises of advertising. Enoch, as a representative of the latter, seeks to improve his life through increased participation in consumerism, which ultimately ends in grotesque frustration. In the second chapter, "No One Was Paying Attention to the Sky," I expand on the first chapter's premise by illustrating how O'Connor presents a return to Christianity—the exercise of an authentic wise blood—as the only way to address the issues of modernity. The chapter traces the dialectical structure of Hazel's spiritual journey from the naïve faith of his youth, through his apostasy during the war and turn towards consumerism, and finally to the humbling of his secular egoism and return to a Christian faith. His return to faith, however, is grotesque and unsettling. Drawing on the work of John Hawkes, Frederick Crews, and John Ruskin, the conclusion will explore some of the questions that O'Connor's emphasis on the grotesque raises. Particularly, can such an unsympathetic narrative tone positively and accurately depict an elevated spiritual life, or does it simply revel in the moral and spiritual squalor that it claims to reject?

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List of Abbreviations

CW *Complete Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988)

HB *Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, 1988)

MM *Mystery & Manners* (New York: Farrar, 1970)

WB *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, 1962)

Introduction

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim suggests that religious practices and the supernatural are merely collective representations and projections of the societies that espouse them. One of the most positive aspects of religious belief and practice is that it fosters a collective identification among members of a society; it is, in essence, the Ur social institution. While Durkheim is able to identify many positive aspects of religious life, his overall analysis portrays religious belief as unequivocally conservative in its nature. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it:

One need not suppose that this is the whole truth about religion to see that in a society of which Durkheim's thesis is true, the religious consciousness will be profoundly conservative. It will at once express and reinforce the social, political, and moral *status quo*. It is only insofar as religion ceases to be what Durkheim said it was that it can become an instrument of change. (3)

MacIntyre identifies a different interpretation of religious life that resists the sort of "collective representations" that Durkheim understands to be its primary function. Numerous theorists, theologians, and philosophers have identified this critical current of the Christian faith, including Protestant reformers like Thomas Müntzer, Marxists like Ernst Bloch, and modern political activists and commentators like Cornell West, not to mention the collective efforts of movements like Liberation Theology or Solidarity in Poland. MacIntyre identifies the strength of these religious resistance and liberation movements in their ability to "enable individuals to identify and to understand themselves

independently of their position in the existing social structure” (4). Religion offers individuals an alternative framework for understanding themselves and their society, providing them with the opportunity both to criticize the status quo and to envision some sort of achievable alternative.

With this potentially subversive tradition in mind, I’ve re-approached the work of Flannery O’Connor to investigate her use of religion as a perspective from which to resist post-war consumerism. Other critics such as Jon Lance Bacon and Steve Pinkerton have preceded me in this field, providing seminal new historical studies that helped O’Connor criticism break free from its stagnating theological debates by resituating her work in the Cold War politics of her era. My approach primarily concerns O’Connor’s evocation of religious life as an alternative to the detrimental effects of modern American culture (consumerism, cultural uniformity, deterioration of the familial and social ties, etc.). In my reading, O’Connor shares the sentiments of MacIntyre regarding religion’s capacity to provide an alternative framework whereby individuals can develop an image of themselves independently of popular culture, thereby allowing them to achieve a greater sense of freedom, and, to a limited extent, inspire a similar change in others.

My work also draws on critics who’ve resisted the traditional theological discourse of O’Connor studies. O’Connor provides an abundance of letters and prose asserting the Christian meaning of her work, and, while they can be useful for unpacking many of her texts, they have also limited the critical approaches that O’Connor scholarship has pursued, particularly in the realms of feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytic theory. However, even from O’Connor’s earliest critical reception, there

have been dissenters who've questioned the persuasiveness of her religious claims. Hazel's conversion in *Wise Blood* is one area in particular where some critics have challenged O'Connor's religious interpretation of her own work. While the religious elements are all present, the nature of Hazel's conversion is rather ambiguous and could support any number of religious interpretations ranging from orthodox Catholic to a non-theological reading or, at its most extreme, the novel could even be accused of sounding demonic, an argument John Hawkes made in "Flannery O'Connor's Devil." This tradition of reading the author against the grain has made clear that O'Connor's depiction of the Christian life, while able to provide an alternative framework that can be fruitful for personal development and social awareness, is often distorted by the literary form it takes. Christian charity, love of God, and fraternity, the ideals of Christian life, are often subordinated to the despotic narrator's desire to humble a society too conceited to recognize its need for supernatural aid. The narrator's moral condemnation produces damaged and alienated characters that fail to overcome the obstacles that O'Connor identifies in the opposing social structures (i.e. modern, secular life, existentialism, consumer Capitalism, etc.).

My overall project consists of explicating the oppositional forces in *Wise Blood* that exist between post-war consumerism in America and O'Connor's depiction of a true Christian life. She uses the trope of wise blood to illustrate humanity's irrational nature. Wise blood, O'Connor says, "is something that enables you to go in the right direction after what you want" (CW 920); it's an unconscious, instinctual force that not only directs one's actions, but also dictates one's goals. She associates wise blood with two emblematic figures in the novel, Hazel Motes and Emery Enoch. Hazel represents the

internal and authentic religious desire in opposition to Enoch's parodic version, which consists of artificial desires implanted by external forces. In this oppositional model, O'Connor illustrates how the parodic version of wise blood, i.e. consumerism, dehumanizes and frustrates individuals who pursue its promise of fulfillment. She offers us the authentic version, i.e. salvation by the Christian faith, as an alternative that not only allows individuals to extricate themselves from the degrading effects of consumerism, but also provides freedom and fulfillment unattainable in any other way.

In my first chapter, I draw the works of Jon Lance Bacon, C. Wright Mills, Vance Packard, and Marshall McLuhan to help explain O'Connor's conception of wise blood and her critique of consumer society. O'Connor uses the concept of wise blood to illustrate how individuals, even under the best of circumstances, only possess a limited capacity for rationality and freedom. O'Connor privileges what she considers a subconscious desire for the transcendent truth of the Christian faith that she believes provides a freedom from the forms of this world as opposed to crass desires for earthly objects that sustain alienation and unfreedom. This chapter analyzes the misadventures of Enoch and illustrates how he debases his internal desires for community through consumerism. Enoch ultimately follows the advice of the advertising industry to its absurd limit, which he believes suggests that he become an ape, resulting in the frustration of his desire for companionship.

The second chapter outlines Hazel's dialectical journey, tracing his path from the distorted faith of his youth through his years of apostasy and, finally, back to a restored, but somewhat ambiguous faith. By juxtaposing Enoch and Hazel, O'Connor wants to convey that Hazel's Christian life is the preferable alternative to Enoch's frustrated

descent into animalism. However, Hazel's conversion appears to be less and less appealing the further we step away from O'Connor's metaphysical assumptions. Hazel is closely associated with St. Paul, and many of the tropes regarding his conversion, salvation, and sight are derived from Luke's account of Paul's miraculous conversion in the book of Acts. Hazel, however, ceases to resemble Paul after his conversion. Paul's post-conversion, although plagued by hardship, could be described as joyous and motivated by a desire to spread the gospel and expand the early Christian community. In contrast to Paul, Hazel's conversion increases his isolation and leaves him bereft of joy and love, which is in many ways similar to the degrading effects of consumerism as O'Connor depicts them. As Hazel's conversion fails to improve his life by social or even general Christian standards, it becomes necessary to question how O'Connor's depiction of the Christian life can be understood as preferable to the secular alternative.

O'Connor would remind us, as she reminds one of her correspondents, Carl Hartman, that "where [Hazel] started out preaching the Church Without Christ he ends up with Christ without the church," suggesting that while faith in Christ may be sufficient enough to ensure salvation, he not only lacks the guiding doctrines and sacramental power of the church, but also the fellowship and the community that would allow him to flourish. Hazel's conclusion, according to O'Connor, isn't meant to represent the Christian ideal, but rather a deficient version of its ideal and the need for further reformation. The grotesque genre becomes a way for O'Connor to artistically represent the continuing need for this dialectical progression and refinement. O'Connor exaggerates Hazel's faults in order to show her audience that the Christian life is not a static but rather a dynamic process of becoming that requires its adherents to continually

reorient and reevaluate themselves against the doctrines of the church and the mystery of grace. In *Wise Blood*, Hazel's journey represents the initial stages of the non-believer as he approaches salvation and, unfortunately, he dies before he can make further refinements.

Finally, in my conclusion, I will raise some remaining questions about the ambiguities between O'Connor's literary form and the faith she professes. Drawing on the work of John Ruskin, John Hawkes, and Marshall Bruce Gentry, I will illustrate how O'Connor's use of the negative grotesque also subverts her religious claims. The lack of narrative sympathy for the grotesques of *Wise Blood* as well as any positive Christian content leave much to be desired by a skeptical reader who seeks respite from the frenetic world of consumerism.

Led by Ropes, Scents, and Dog Whistles:
The Deterioration of Self and Society in Post-War America

In 1957, Flannery O'Connor wrote a short essay titled "The Fiction Writer and His Country" in response to an editorial she read in *Life Magazine*. According to O'Connor, "*Life* magazine asked grandly, 'who speaks for America today?'" (MM 25). This question arose because the staff at *Life* perceived an incongruity between the "unparalleled prosperity" experienced in the years following WWII and the dour literature produced by America's leading literary minds. For the *Life* staff, the economic prosperity and a greater distribution of goods should have elated the public to no end, but instead, while America made some advances in terms of economic equality and was considered "the most powerful country in the world," its novelists "were writing as if they lived in packing boxes on the edge of the dump while they awaited admission to the poorhouse" (26). In the article's conclusion, the author challenges American writers to produce literature that celebrates the "joy of life" (26); a quality that the magazine's staff believes should be the direct consequence of America's economic. O'Connor, however, challenges the article's economic assumptions: "these screams of joy," she writes, "would [not] be quite so piercing if joy were really more abundant in our prosperous society" (30); a booming economy, according to O'Connor, does not have a direct correlation with personal joy or social felicity. In the concluding pages of the essay, O'Connor postulates that the only voice of affirmation truly capable of complementing the post-war economic boom would have to be the voice of "the advertising agencies" (34).

In *Wise Blood*, O'Connor attempts to debunk the kind of mentality that seeks to find a hard and fast correlation between joy and economic prosperity. For O'Connor, "poverty in [the United States] is not a matter of physical want" (HB 95), suggesting that the discontent experienced by a large majority of Americans has little to do with their economic failures and successes. Instead, she feels that poverty, as it is handled by most serious writers, is a trope that provides a concrete social setting for authors to explore various aspects of social discontent: "The particular appeal of the poor for the fiction writer is existential not economic" (95). She will later add, "Everybody as far as I am concerned is The Poor" (103). The poverty found in *Wise Blood* can be attributed to the existential emptiness of consumerism and the deterioration of traditional social institutions. O'Connor and many of her contemporaries believe that greater access to material goods without proper support from the right kind of social institutions will potentially hinder the average citizen's psychological and spiritual well-being; and this is especially true when advertisers prey on the weaknesses of consumers to make their products desirable. For this reason, Jon Lance Bacon writes that the "signs of consumer society that appear throughout [*Wise Blood*] hardly justify national celebration" (27).

One concern O'Connor shares with her contemporaries is the illusion of freedom created by modern, consumer capitalism. She challenges any narrowly constructed definition of freedom that predicates free action on access to and participation in the free exchange of goods and services in a market economy. In a letter written to Carl Hartman in March of 1954, she disqualifies the proliferation of options and choices (make, model, brand, color, flavor, etc.) within consumerism as a legitimate construction of freedom, because "choosing between trifles," she says, "is not free choice" (CW 921). Here,

O'Connor, I think, would be in agreement with Herbert Marcuse, who suggests that “free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear—that is, if they sustain alienation” (8). She uses the concept of wise blood to investigate Enoch and Hazel’s actions and evaluate them in accordance with a religious conception of freedom, which she ultimately derives from a Christian picture of salvation and the mystery of divine grace.

As a novelist with theological concerns, O'Connor’s voice is unique amongst the secular humanist critics of her era, because unlike her contemporaries, she believes the degradation of freedom should be considered not only as a cultural, economic, psychological, or sociopolitical issue but, ultimately, as a spiritual issue. Of course, she doesn’t hesitate to draw on the secular humanist work of her contemporaries to illustrate how the media and advertising industry manipulate individuals; like them, she depicts the ideology that informs consumerism—its suggestivity, its promise of self-actualization through materialism, its constant production of needs and satisfactions—as an illusion that impoverishes her characters’ inner lives and manipulates their integrity or ability to act freely to the extent that their will no longer seems to be their own. However, unlike these critics, she primarily considers herself a novelist with religious concerns, and, “for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where adequate motivation and adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don’t understand rather than in what we do” (MM 42). So while humanist critics like Marshall McLuhan, Vance Packard, C. Wright Mills, and Herbert Marcuse want to construct narratives that seek to

explain society to itself, thereby demystifying the methods of control that govern it, O'Connor ultimately wants to guide her audience beyond this horizon of causality. She believes that true freedom has a transcendent quality and needs to be predicated on metaphysical grounds; "it has to be between heaven and hell, as far as you can approximate the shades of either in a grey world" (CW 921). By positing freedom in terms of the ultimate destination of one's soul, O'Connor challenges readers of *Wise Blood* to demand a broader and more robust definition of what being free means: "freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen" (WB 5). By evaluating post-war America with the counter-cultural standards of Christian theology O'Connor is able to present the pervasive unfreedom that lurks just beneath the post-war economic bonanza. In addition to providing an alternative perspective on modern society, O'Connor believes that Christianity's prescriptive code of conduct will help insulate and protect individuals from the forces of modern, consumer culture that conspire to manipulate, exploit, and control their intimate lives.

My immediate goal in this first chapter is to explicate the parodic or false conception of wise blood that O'Connor juxtaposes with a genuine, spiritual intuition or grace. Enoch, more than any other character, embodies the parodic version of wise blood, which O'Connor uses to satirize the aspirations of post-war consumer society and the deterioration of freedom therein. The false conception of wise blood that reduces Enoch's humanity to primitive animalism by the end of his story arc illustrates the pitfalls of consumerism and its inability to fulfill its explicit as well as implicit promises—

namely, to remedy the alienating effects of modern society by promising to increase one's social desirability through the acquisition of material goods.

*

In *Wise Blood*, an unseen, ambiguous force influences much of the novel's action. O'Connor variously describes this force controlling her characters as if they were puppets being led about by ropes, scents, and dog whistles imperceptible to the senses. In the first chapter, the unseen force restrains Hazel "by a rope caught in the middle of his back and attached to the train ceiling" (WB 12). Later, it leads him through the streets of Taulkinham by a scent "always being drawn away" (37). It also directs Enoch through those same streets "as if he were led by a silent melody or by one those whistles that only dogs can hear" (139). The unseen force or forces that direct Enoch and Hazel to their fate provide the novel with its title: *Wise Blood*.

Wise blood, as a concept, is never quite concretized; conceptually, it exists in a nebulous space between various forms of economic determinism and the mystery of divine grace; O'Connor depicts these forces as either hegemonic bondage or true, spiritual freedom. At various points in the novel, O'Connor clearly identifies wise blood with an unconscious, (ir)rational desire for salvation in Christ and redemption from sin. These scenes are primarily associated with Hazel's story, which will be discussed at length in the next chapter. O'Connor juxtaposes the Christian formulation of wise blood with a relatively powerful response to media images and advertising that entice their audiences to engage in consumerism as a method for self-improvement. Since O'Connor clearly states that her ultimate reality is the incarnation, it becomes clear that when she

associates wise blood with an instinctive responsiveness to advertising, she does so ironically, suggesting that it is a travesty of the Christian concept of grace.

In a letter to Carl Hartman, O'Connor claims the consumerist form of wise blood will get you "inside of an ape suit" (CW 920), making a direct reference to Enoch's conclusion in the novel, which suggests that consumerism has a degenerative tendency that degrades human being's God-given characteristics. The genuine or religious form of wise blood, however, turns Hazel "further & further inside himself where one may be supposed to find the answer" to life's mystery, leading him towards more honorable and contemplative goals (920). O'Connor believes that the degradation of modern life, whether through consumerism or any other secular modes of living, can only be rehabilitated by the recognition of the human need for redemption in Christ. For Enoch, the advertisements he sees—representing familial bliss (the Doctor Denton pajama ad, 133), successful, popular young men ("THE young man of the future" insurance ad, 191), material satisfaction (the peeler salesman's off-the-cuff joke, 40), and general self-improvement—seem to promise that if he increases his participation in consumer capitalism, then he might be able to overcome some of the difficulties and dilemmas of the modern age. However, the more Enoch invests in consumerism, the more his feelings of alienation and disappointment increase.

Every character in the novel, like Enoch, struggles with self-improvement in one form or another. Enoch wants to become more likeable and socially integrated; others, like Hazel, want to be more independent and free; and some, like the Layfield-Shoates and the Asa-Sabbath Hawks duos, simply want to improve their economic status. O'Connor wants to illustrate how these desires are really just illusions that misdirect their

longing for Salvation. But Enoch, more than any other character, cannot resist the persuasive ploys of the media and advertising industry. O'Connor believes the presentation of consumerism as an alternate route for personal and social fulfillment obscures religious truth. Starting with this question of the authentic and the artificial, we can begin to construe O'Connor's understanding of freedom.

In the "Preface to the Second Edition" of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor attempts to "prevent some of the far-out interpretations" (HB 473) of the novel by clarifying her intentions. Primarily, O'Connor wants to correct the misconception that Hazel is a kind of "admirable nihilist" (70), but in doing so, she also draws our attention back to the concept of wise blood and in its relation to freewill:

For them [misguided readers] Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to. Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic one, can only be asked to deepen. (WB 5)

In this passage, O'Connor formulates integrity as the prioritization of certain drives over others. She even claims that one's integrity may be conceived of negatively—that is to say, if one has a persistent desire or drive that cannot be suppressed or redirected, this may be considered a form of integrity. O'Connor's point is to have us reconsider the notion of freedom as it relates to integrity and wise blood. She defines freedom as the

expression of or fidelity to a constant, abiding desire; something vastly superior to the transitory urges inspired by advertisements and cultural fads. She offers us Enoch as an example of the fate of travestied desires and Hazel as a witness: “Enoch, with his wise blood, unerringly lights on what man looks like without God and obligingly brings it for Haze to have a look at” (CW 920). As a representative of the Godless man, Enoch’s story, more than any other character, embodies a critique of the modern, secular world and its turn towards consumer capitalism.

O’Connor illustrates the overwhelming presence of advertising well before she introduces Enoch. In the first chapter, Hazel, as a passenger aboard a train destined for Taulkinham, sees the ubiquity of product marketing. The train reveals the thorough integration of advertising into the Southern landscape and life itself. Even in the most impoverished areas the landscape bears the messages of consumerism, imploring commuters to purchase products like “CCC snuff” with a giant “red and white” ad “peeling across the side” of half-dilapidated barn (13). The presence of these advertisements increases exponentially the nearer one gets to the city. The proliferation of signage and advertising reaches its apex at the terminal station. An overwhelming multitude of advertising signage inundates the city’s new arrivals as they disembark; in bold fonts and flashing lights the commuters are solicited to take advantage of sundry service and products: “PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically” (29). Amidst the bustle of crowds and consumer activity, Hazel seeks a bit of solace by retreating to the most private of public places, the bathroom, and even in this unhallowed

sanctuary, he cannot escape the announcement for Mrs. Leora Watts' "friendliest bed in town" (30).

In our first encounter with Enoch, the narration follows Hazel through a bustling Thursday night when "the stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights so people could have an extra opportunity to see what was for sale" (37). The fact that we meet Enoch at this weekly retail event should not be surprising, since so much of his life is spent actively or passively as a consumer. A quick gloss of the novel would reveal that Enoch's favorite pastimes are perusing the supermarket, frequenting Walgreens and soda counters, going to movies, and visiting the occasional prostitute (in fact, on their first encounter, Enoch suggests that they do all of these activities). Hazel randomly crosses paths with Enoch when the both stop to watch a street vendor demonstrate a mechanical potato peeler. The salesman skillfully addresses the audience en masse while maintaining the illusion of intimacy "as if in a personal conversation" (WB 38). While the listless crowd is only moderately interested in the demonstration, Enoch actively participates; when others are addressed, he does his best to make them aware of it and he responds cordially to the salesman's jokes when no one else will. For Enoch, this exhibition is more than just a sales pitch; it's a life-changing event: "You'll thank the day you ever stopped here," says the salesman, "Ever' one of you people purchasing one theseyer macines'll never forget it!" (40). When the street vendor suggests that Hazel should take one home to his wife or mother, and Hazel admits that he has neither, the salesman jokingly suggests that he could purchase the peeler to cure his loneliness: "well pshaw...he needs one theseyer just to keep him company" (40). Enoch, then, becomes the butt of this joke as he immediately begins "fumbling in his pockets" for his money,

hoping to cure his social estrangement with one of the potato peelers (40). The joke reveals a sad truth about social deterioration in modern life. It glibly reiterates the fantasy that the social stresses of modern industrial society can be provisionally ameliorated with material possessions.

In *The Mechanical Bride*, Marshall McLuhan meticulously explains a number of the methods by which advertisers, through the use of suggestive imagery, are able to appeal to consumers on a subconscious level, effectively increasing their ability to promote and sell their products. When an advertising pitch makes its appeals tacitly or implies certain unstated promises, the consumer is less likely to critically assess the product or what drives him or her to possess it. The effectiveness of this method leads to mass-scale manipulation of consumers: “Thousands of the best-trained individual minds,” McLuhan says, “have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective mind” in order to reduce society to a condition of “public helplessness” (V). The term public helplessness signifies the deterioration of the individual’s autonomy at a psychological level in order to “manipulate, exploit, and control” (V) consumers from the very source of their identity. This particular advertising strategy encroaches on the private, intimate space where an individual may become and remain him or herself, thus reducing his or her ability to act freely. To this point, Vance Packard adds that the “probing and manipulation” of individuals en masse “has seriously antihumanistic implications. Much of it seems to represent regress rather than progress for man in his long struggle to become a rational and self-guiding being” (6). The parodic version of wise blood attributed to Enoch seems to be nothing more than the effectiveness of the “depth probing” strategies adopted by modern advertisers and their ability to reduce consumers

to the state of public helplessness described by McLuhan. Enoch has so thoroughly suppressed a theological conception of wise blood and introjected the public helplessness of modern society that he not only feels compelled to act upon these implanted urges, but he mistakenly identifies these external forces as a sort primordial instinct, as if they were a kind of extra-sensory perception that he is fortunate to have inherited: “He knew by his blood. He had wise blood like his daddy” (79).

O’Connor ultimately wants to distinguish between the comfortable and emotionally satisfying drives inculcated by the consumerist tendencies of modern, industrial society, including the modern philosophical trends that she sees informing it, and the less palatable truths of the Christian faith: “The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally. A higher paradox confounds emotion as well as reason and there are long periods in the lives of all of us, and of the saints, when the truth as revealed by faith is hideous, emotionally disturbing, downright repulsive” (HB 100). While the expression and realization of one’s desire for salvation may present unpleasant moments, it will ultimately liberate the individual and, for O’Connor, provide them with an abiding joy not subject to winds of change. She claims that salvation and redemption are the true ends of every human life and to repress or bind these desires hinders the true expression of the subject’s individuality. By this token, the parodic version of wise blood informed by external sources can only be understood as a pleasant unfreedom, which will always result in the frustration of a true, abiding joy.

If we look at Enoch’s daily routine, we can see how advertising and consumer culture have displaced the true object of Enoch’s desire and replaced it with an empty cycle of need, demand, and desire in constant reproduction. There are three telling

episodes where O'Connor describes Enoch having very little control over his actions, because the external, manipulative forces generated by consumerism have such a strong influence over him.

In the first example, O'Connor associates Enoch's activity and engagement with consumerism as a natural instinct. However, Enoch's engagement with consumerism should not be confused with anything natural; rather, modern consumerism is so unnaturally powerful that it supplants his natural activities. For instance, each day after Enoch gets off work, he wanders about different shopping centers without any clear intention, just soaking in the images projected by advertisements: "it was his custom to spend an hour or so in [a supermarket] every afternoon after he left the city park, browsing around among the canned goods and reading the cereal stories" (130). Enoch spends most of his leisure time wandering around supermarkets, consuming with his eyes when he cannot purchase with his wallet; he dedicates a good portion of life to the acquisition or consumption of commodities. Consumerism's siren call renders him powerless and he lacks the cultural or spiritual fortification that might help him understand that these objects cannot satisfy him. These strange desires compel Enoch even when he cannot articulate what they actually demand of him. Like a capricious magpie, he's constantly led about by the bobbles and charms that catch his eye, but he hasn't the slightest clue of how they are going to improve or enrich his life: "sometimes he didn't think, he only wondered; then before long he would find himself doing this or that, like a bird finds itself building a nest when it hasn't actually been planning to" (129). Soon after the onset of this inexplicable impulse, he purchases "chintz curtains, a bottle of gilt, and a paint brush with all the money he had saved" (137). These are the

items Enoch uses to construct the tabernacle for the new Jesus. While the narrative emphasizes that it's ultimately necessary for Hazel's story that Enoch present him with this desiccated, lifeless corpse as the symbolic reality of his Church Without Christ, it's by no means necessary that Enoch attach consumerism to this act by spending his savings to construct the tabernacle. The desire to participate in consumerism motivates Enoch just as much as the spiritual objective that O'Connor and her depiction of grace necessitate. In the end, Enoch doesn't know why he has spent his money, and, in fact, he is disappointed that he has done so, because he would rather have purchased a new "shirt and phosphorescent tie" (137), items he can more readily comprehend in social terms. With the parodic version of wise blood, O'Connor suggests that no matter what one purchases or where one is led, the same discontent will be sure to follow.

After this incident, Enoch begins to mistrust his wise blood, which results in the suppression of the theological version, allowing it to be supplanted by its secular opposite. Basically, Enoch inverts O'Connor's model of wise blood and privileges the consumer model. He identifies the external forces of consumerism as his true desires and rejects Christian grace as an alien force. According to Enoch, grace or the theological version of wise blood does not have his best interests in mind. He believes the theological wise blood is a conspiratorial force "in secret conference with itself every day, only stopping now and then to shout some orders at him" (134). The dictates of this misunderstood impulse begin to agitate him more and more, eventually leading to a full-throttled rebellion:

His blood was rushing around like a woman who cleans up the house after the company has come, and he was surly and rebellious. When he realized

that today was the day, he decided not to get up. He didn't want to justify his daddy's blood, he didn't want to be always having to do something that something else wanted him to do, that he didn't know what it was and that was always dangerous. (135)

Enoch begins to perceive his spiritual intuition as “something that something else wanted him to do”; as an alien force that counters his own agenda and is actually opposed to his own well-being. On the contrary, the safe and comfortable desires inspired by the parodied version wise blood—the external forces that encourage continued participation in consumerism and material conformity—seem much more natural and emotionally satisfying for him, because they promise emotional satisfaction bought on the cheap.

In the tabernacle incident, Enoch confuses the discontent and displeasure that follows his involvement in consumerism with the grace that leads him toward to assist in Hazel's revelation. Unhappy with the outcome produced by allowing his wise blood to lead him, Enoch consciously tries to avoid its direction. By the end of chapter eight, he no longer wants to “justify his daddy's blood” (135), which he had previously perceived as an utmost necessity, but actively rebels against it, and attempts to defer whatever it is that he will be led to do. During this period of rebellion, Enoch once again seeks refuge in Taulkinham's retail center. In one scene, he rests against a Walgreen's window display, a sublime portrait of consumer culture, which simultaneously dwarfs him and draws him in:

Sweat crept down his back and provoked him to itch so that in just a few minutes he appeared to be working his way across the glass by his muscles, against a background of alarm clocks, toilet waters, candies,

sanitary pads, fountain pens, and pocket flashlights, displayed in all colors to twice his height. (135)

The description of Enoch's muscles operating of their own accord, independent of his conscious mind, inching him ever so slowly into the store, reveals the not-so-subtle power of product marketing. Instead of being repelled by the chaotic mountain of everyday items, Enoch is strangely attracted to it, and once he's inside, he cannot help but purchase some popcorn and a beverage from the soda counter.

In the last and most comic episode in which external forces are shown to control Enoch's behavior, a movie theater billboard draws him inside even when the films don't appeal to him. Right before entering the theater, Enoch recollects the last few times he had surrendered to his wise blood: "it'll be something against the law, he said. It's always something against the law" (137). Assured that his wise blood will endanger him, he vows to continue his rebellion: "I ain't going to do it, he said and stopped. He had stopped in front of a movie house where there was a large illustration of a monster stuffing a young woman into an incinerator" (137-38). When Enoch represses what he thinks is an alien force that will lead him to behave erratically, potentially endangering his safety, a second, increasingly insidious, external force, the media in its various forms, takes its place and immediately persuades him to act against his own interests and well-being:

I ain't going in no picture show like that, he said, giving it a nervous look. I'm going home. I ain't going to wait around in no picture show. I ain't got the money to buy a ticket, he said, taking out his purse again. I ain't even going to count thisyer change.

It ain't but forty-three cent here, he said, that ain't enough. A sign said the price of a ticket for adults was forty-five cents, balcony, thirty-five. I ain't going to sit in no balcony, he said, buying a thirty-five cent ticket.

I ain't going in, he said.

Two doors flew open and he found himself moving down a long red foyer and then up a darker tunnel and then up a higher, still darker tunnel. In a few minutes he was up in a high part of the maw, feeling around, like Jonah, for a seat. I ain't going to look at it, he said furiously. (138)

The humor in this scene emerges out of the absurd depiction of the Christian adage that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; or more exactly here, that the spirit is unwilling, but the flesh is weak. Enoch knows he doesn't want to see these grisly films, but he cannot resist the cinematic spectacle. The kind of subconscious ploys used in marketing register immediately, compelling him to act before he can contemplate his actions critically. The lag between his thoughts and actions propel him further and further into the theater and into an experience he would rather avoid. The result is a kind of slapstick humor where the body loses control of itself and, subsequently, subjects itself to physical harm in the absence of mind. However, Enoch isn't battered about by stepping on rakes and walking into doors, rather he subjects himself to mental strife by watching films that terrify him: "Enoch pulled his head down very low and drew his knees up in front of his face; only his eyes looked at the screen" (138). Watching the next film, he has to "grip the two arms of his seat to keep himself from falling over the rail in front of him" (139). Finally, like Jonah emerging from the great fish, Enoch bursts forth into the street ready to capitulate to his authentic wise blood once more: "he had the feeling

that the knowledge he couldn't avoid was almost on him. His resignation was perfect" (139). It should be noted that this experience doesn't affect him positively; rather, it's a forced capitulation, which includes the resentment and indignation that go along with forced compliance. Whether Enoch serves his authentic wise blood or the parodic version informed by consumer culture, in his circumstance "one Jesus was as bad as another" (176). Enoch may not enjoy or approve of the internal desires over the externally implanted ones. But, as Jon Lance Bacon notes, "the external stimulus of advertising determines the particular manner in which his internal compulsion will be expressed" (30), suggesting that the internal and external impulses are intimately linked in their expression, highlighting the depth with which consumer culture has ingrained itself in Enoch.¹

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While I've described in some detail how consumerism in *Wise Blood* has undermined a traditional theological model of freedom, I have yet to explain why it appeals to Enoch. From the tone of the discussion thus far, there seems to be nothing alluring about consumer culture in post-war America. Therefore, I'll dedicate the next section of this chapter to explaining what the immediate appeal of consumerism is for a

¹ My presentation of this scene hinges on the ability of the media industry to solicit and monopolize our time and mental vigor in activities that we have no real interest in. It should be noted that O'Connor has a more complex view of the incident, because she depicts grace working positively through the media's manipulation of the individual. In this case, distinguishing the internal instinct from the external manipulation proves difficult, because she makes the Biblical allusion to Jonah, whose rebellion against God's will landed him inside of a great fish (Enoch inside of an ape suit?), a trial that ultimately resigned him to God's will. Enoch has a similar reaction. After witnessing the progression of the didactic narrative assembled by the triple feature, which he was unable to resist, Enoch gives in to his wise blood.

character like Enoch, highlighting both its implicit and explicit promises, while at the same time showing how these promises are ultimately frustrated by the very system that creates them.

The origin of Enoch's faith in consumerism seems to stem from a very human desire for companionship and a sense of belonging. Displaced from his hometown and family, Enoch struggles to socially integrate himself in Taulkinham, where he has worked for two months. He registers his complaints with Hazel numerous times on their first encounter: "This is one more hard place to make friends in. I been here two months and I don't know nobody. Look like all they want to do it knock you down'" (48). More importantly, Enoch feels objectified and abandoned by his father, who traded him off to a welfare woman when he was just an adolescent and, again, as an adult, when he forced Enoch to move away from home and take up residence in Taulkinham. Just the thought of his abandonment and the doubtful prospect of making new friends reduces Enoch to tears:

"My daddy made me come," he said in a cracked voice. Haze looked at him and saw he was crying, his face seamed and wet and a purple-pink color. "I ain't but eighteen year old," he cried, "an' he made me come and I don't know nobody, nobody here'll have nothing to do with nobody else. They ain't friendly." (57)

This rather disconcerting eruption of pent-up emotion, on the surface, may seem gratuitous and without proper justification in this early chapter. However, Enoch's outburst is related to his continuing effort to debase a strong desire for reconciliation with his father. Enoch has tried and continues to try to make friends and establish himself

within Taulkinham's social circles, but to no avail. Enoch doesn't realize that his attempts are misguided, regardless of his social ineptness, because he is unable to distinguish the characteristics of a genuine society from the friendly demeanor projected by the service industry; his attempts to make friends with the short order cooks, waitresses, and service industry workers he encounters are flawed from the outset.

Enoch mistakenly assumes his interactions with the employees of Taulkinham's service industry are or can be substantive and amicable social exchanges. If we return again to our first encounter with Enoch, we see that he's charmed by the affability of a street vendor. The "courtesy, helpfulness, and kindness" that the salesman emanates seems to be somewhat genuine, but when Asa Hawks interrupts his sales pitch, a surreptitious surge of hostility ruptures the illusion of civility. According to C. Wright Mills, the salesman is a classic example of capitalism's appropriation of the traits of friendship and community that were "once intimate" but have been adopted as "part of the impersonal means of livelihood" (XVII). In O'Connor's later work, she will again use friendly salesman trope in her depiction of Meeks, the copper flue salesman from *The Violent Bear It Away*. Meeks confesses, "you couldn't sell a copper flue to a man you didn't love. [...] He said love is the only policy that worked 95% of the time" (CW 362). The illusion of community and love used by salesmen is a mere ploy to generate sales. But in *Wise Blood*, O'Connor suspends the usual "courtesy, helpfulness, and kindness" of the salesmen in order to reveal the Machiavellian reality of economic interactions. By peeling away the veneer of affability, O'Connor reveals the insincerity that lies behind commercial interactions and the degraded social conditions that Marx describes as having "left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked

self-interest, than callous ‘cash payment’” (57). Whatever scrap of genuine human concern and affection for one’s fellow citizen remains amongst the citizens of Taulkinham, it cannot be found in the grocery stores, lunch counters, or theaters that Enoch frequents.

Enoch sees an opportunity for friendship in every commercial interaction, but he fails to understand the level of systemic alienation that the members of Taulkinham’s service industry are subjected to, and, thus, fails to understand their annoyance when he imposes even further upon their personal lives. According to Mills, the modern retail setting achieves new levels of alienated labor and increases the sense of self-alienation amongst the work force. Jon Lance Bacon identifies in the eighth chapter of *Wise Blood* this progressive stage of self-alienation that Mills depicts amongst retail and white-collar employees. Specifically, Bacon draws our attention to the Walgreen’s soda counter promotional. As a promotion for a new beverage, the “Lime-Cherry Surprise,” the store has remodeled the soda counter so that countertops and signage coordinate the color scheme of the new drink: “The fountain counter was pink and green marble linoleum and behind there was a red-headed waitress in a lime-colored uniform and a pink apron” (136). But the coordination doesn’t stop with inanimate objects; it also appropriates the biological features of the waitress. In an effort to create a totally administrated environment, the waitress is reduced to just another object that needs coordinate with the new color scheme: “She had green eyes set in pink and they resembled a picture behind her of a Lime-Cherry Surprise, a special that day for ten cents” (136). Bacon sees the waitress’s appropriation of commercial imagery (or, more appropriately,

commercialism's appropriation of the waitress's body) as a travesty of the individual identity in the modern work place:

The description suggests more than the suppression of personality with the commercial setting. The waitress can take off the uniform and the apron after work, but her eyes will remain green and pink. Her identity has been assimilated into the presentation of the product, the fountain drink she pushes so aggressively... (32-33)

Bacon sees a correlation between the appropriation of the waitress's biological features and C. Wright Mills' concerns about the emergence of the "personality market." Mills observes that the "personal or even intimate traits of the employee are drawn into the sphere of exchange and become of commercial relevance, become commodities in the labor market" (182). In a work environment where an employee's most intimate traits become objectified and subjected to market exchange, one can understand that below the company mandated appearance of affability there often lies a bitter resentment: "They sell by the week or month their smiles and their kindly gestures, and they must practice the prompt repression of resentment and aggression" (Mills XVII). Enoch is quite oblivious to this extreme form of alienation and the surreptitious resentment it produces. In ignorance, he imposes himself on Taulkinham's employed as if their public presence is of their own accord. A comprehensive list of Enoch's attempts to make friends with various employed individuals is unnecessary. Instead, I will focus on three separate, but equally disastrous scenes where Enoch's naiveté and obliviousness prevent him from realizing that his advances are unwanted and results in the kind of rupture we witness in

the peeler scene. Each attempt, in its own way, contributes to the final, frustrated outcome of Enoch's wise blood.

In the first two attempts, we can only speculate about the details of Enoch's initial advances, which we can infer from what we already know about him, primarily, that he has a powerful longing for friendship and that it is his habit to socialize with the employed. In the first scene worthy of analysis, Enoch fails to make friends with Maude, a waitress at the Frosty Bottle. We can infer from the waitress's reference to Enoch's regular patronage and her annoyed demeanor that she had been a target of one of his earlier efforts to make friends, and the relationship has not only failed to thrive, but soured: "Ever' day" she says, "ever' day that son of a bitch comes in here" (90). Maude, the unkempt server with "a man's face and big muscled arms" (89), probably expressed much more cordiality towards Enoch when they first met, but after a period of attrition, Enoch's obnoxious personality, coupled with his forwardness, most likely diminished what little ability she has to tolerate him.² Enoch, however, believes that she is "secretly in love with him" (82) and mistakenly interprets her discourteousness as a lover's ruse. He, however, doesn't seem to notice her barely contained animosity and flirts with her as he orders: "'I want a chocolate malted milk shake, baby girl,' Enoch said softly. 'I want a lot of ice cream in it'" (89). The condescending tone Enoch uses when he calls her

² One can imagine that Maude's initial reaction to Enoch may have been similar to her initial reaction to Hazel. When she first meets Hazel, she compliments him by referring to him as a "clean boy" in contrast to Enoch, the "pus-marked bastard" (91). Maude's "clean boy" talk begins to upset Hazel and, believing that she is insinuating something about him, he brusquely asserts, "I AM clean [...] If Jesus existed, I wouldn't be clean" (91). Once Hazel breaks his spell of silence, we are able to see how quickly Maude reshapes her opinions of people. After Hazel's remark, which is odd, to say the least, but nothing unforgiveable, she immediately relegates Hazel from the status of a "clean boy" to that of a "bastard" and a "filthy boy" (92).

“baby girl” has its obvious effect on Maude. The only thing that keeps her from open hostility is the whisky she sips from under the counter and the pending fifteen cents that Enoch owes her for his milkshake. When she produces the milkshake, “thump[ing]” it down on the counter and demanding fifteen cents with a “roar,” Enoch responds by making a suggestive remark: “You’re worth more than that, baby girl” (90).

Enoch’s sexist joke intimates one of the conditions of alienated labor—the confusion of waged labor power with the individual who performs labor. She responds with naked hostility by demanding to know why Hazel associates with such a repugnant teen: “what you come in here with a son of a bitch like that for?” (90). Enoch’s joke, of course, is derogatory and insensitive, but it’s not just the sexism that offends Maude; the sexual implications seem only to be compounded by its suggestion of intimacy between the two of them. Maude may have to sell her labor power to make a living, but being friendly or intimate with a boy like Enoch exceeds her job description.

Similar to his patronage of the Frosty Bottle, Enoch makes a daily appearance at the Paris Diner, and, the unnamed short order waitress at the Paris Diner seems to have been another one of Enoch’s early targets for friendship, and, similarly, despite Enoch’s regularity, the waitress has “never learned to like him” (192). She sees Enoch as a continual nuisance and makes no effort to serve him cordially. When Enoch visits the diner just prior to his disappearance in chapter nine, he orders his usual milkshake and a bowl of soup, but instead of filling the order, the waitress begins frying a portion of bacon. O’Connor demonstrates the waitress’s complete disregard for the quirky teen by informing her readers that “there was no one to eat the bacon but her” (192). Similar to his behavior at the Frosty Bottle, Enoch transgresses the boundaries of the formal setting

by reaching across the counter and poking the waitress with a pointed walking stick. After this inappropriate act fails to produce the response he's looking for, he senses that his order won't be prioritized, so he amends the order to make the service as easy as possible. While Enoch waits for his new order, a piece of cake (another joke at poor Enoch's expense?), he begins to read through the comic pages of the paper and discovers that Gongga, the celebrity Gorilla, will be making a final appearance at a local theater. Enoch then rushes off gleefully, anticipating a great opportunity. He tells the waitress, "you may not see me again...the way I am" (194). She replies with a snide remark, "any way I don't see you will be all right with me" (194). While this final remark speaks well enough for itself, I should reiterate that Enoch's attempts to integrate himself into Taulkinham society via the economic sectors seems doomed to fail. Enoch has yet to understand the difference between an authentic social interaction (one that can serve as the basis for friendship or integrate him as a valued member of a community) and one that is predicated on a financial transaction, which requires only a finite, terminal obligation. Enoch would like to believe that his patronage means something and that he can purchase more than just a milkshake or a piece of cake, but the waitresses abruptly remind him that he will receive nothing more from them.

The discovery of another appearance of Gongga, the Jungle Monarch, provides the transition from Enoch's second to his final attempt to make friends with the employees of Taulkiham. It should be noted that Enoch had crossed paths with Gongga once before. On their first encounter, Enoch stumbles across Gongga in one of his routine strolls through the heart of the city. Due to inclement weather, Enoch takes shelter under a movie house awning where he discovers a placard that announces a meet-and-greet opportunity with

“GONGA! Giant Jungle Monarch and Great Star! Here in Person!!” (177). Unlike his attempts to make friends with Maude and the waitress at the Paris Diner, Enoch doesn’t pursue Gongga believing that he might make friends; his intentions are exactly the opposite; he understand this encounter as “opportunity to insult a successful ape” (178).

By this point in the novel, O’Connor has made it abundantly clear that Enoch harbors a deep resentment of animals. In the fourth chapter, while Enoch drinks his malted milkshake at the Frosty Bottle, he seethes with resentment as he thinks about the animals at the zoo: “they had to go next to see the animals. He hated them; just thinking about them made his face turn a chocolate purple color as if the malted milk were rising in his head” (90). Each day after work, as a part of his daily ritual, Enoch passes by the various animal cages at the zoo and insults them: “usually he stopped at every cage and made an obscene comment aloud to himself”, like, ““look at that ape, [...] if I had an ass like that,’ he said prudishly, ‘I’d sit on it’”(94). Enoch’s resentment toward animals seems to stem from an inferiority complex roused by a primordial other. Animals, especially the animals on display at the zoo, irritate Enoch because he believes they enjoy a special relationship to the objects of his desire. Every time the narrative portrays Enoch’s thoughts pertaining to the animals, the general source of his frustration emanates from the perceived luxuries that they enjoy, because he tends to anthropomorphize the animals and their living conditions. Initially, he describes them living in cages “like Alcatraz Penitentiary in the movies” (82). Although this description isn’t exactly enviable, it has a kind of cinematic prestige for Enoch and we can note one of the films Enoch watches is a depiction of prison life. The passage continues, “the cages were electrically heated in the winter and air-conditioned in the summer and there were six

men hired to wait on the animals and feed them T-bone steaks. The animals didn't do anything but lie around. Enoch watched them every day, full of awe and hate" (82). From Enoch's perspective, the animals at the zoo live an upper class, leisurely lifestyle, because they enjoy some of the amenities afforded by the upper classes, such as air-conditioned quarters, servants, and T-bone steaks for dinner. For Enoch, this material affluence translates into the kind acrimony that exists between social classes. As Enoch hastens Hazel through the zoo, he pauses for a moment to look at a cage of black bears: "two black bears sat in the first one, facing each other like two matrons having tea, their faces polite and self-absorbed" (93). He believes the animals have a quality of life, both materially and socially—they are living the American dream—that he doesn't have access to and it makes him feel scandalized. He resents their smug, leisurely lifestyle, because he lives so close to the poverty line. So when people queue up to see these animal celebrities, whether the animals at the zoo and Gonga at the movie theater, the fact of their reverence intensifies Enoch's resentment, because, in his mind, "they don't do nothing but sit there all day and stink" (93); their celebrity status is completely unwarranted.

This intense resentment for animals explains why the "opportunity to insult a successful ape" excites Enoch so much. In fact, the prospect excites him so much that he cannot think of "an obscene remark that would be suitable to insult him with. [...] He couldn't even think of the insulting phrases he used every day" (181). He continues to search his catalog of curses, looking for a suitably venomous remark to relegate the presumptuous ape back to its animal ranks, but when the time arrives for Enoch to step

up and hurl his insult, an unexpectedly banal event occurs: Gongga “took his hand with an automatic motion” (181).

Now, most people, if standing in line to shake someone or something’s hand, wouldn’t be overly surprised when it actually happened. Enoch, however, struggles to keep his composure, because “it was the first hand that had been extended to Enoch since he had come to the city. It was warm and soft” (181). This gesture potentially marks a new chapter in Enoch’s life, because he believes that this is the first time that someone or something has been civil with him during his time in Taulkinham, and, in his mind, indicates the opportunity for friendship. Amazed, he begins to spout the mundane details of his life as he had done with Hazel: “My name is Enoch Emery. [...] I attended the Rodemill Boy’s Bible Academy. I work at the city zoo. I seen two of your pictures. I’m only eighteen year old but I already work for the city. My daddy made me com...” (182). At this point, Gongga interrupts Enoch’s life story. Annoyed by the obnoxious adolescent dominating a children’s event, Gongga draws Enoch close, revealing that he isn’t really a gorilla, but a man dressed up in a gorilla suit. With a fierce look, the man impersonating Gongga sends Enoch off with a severe injunction: “You go to hell” (182), he says, jerking his hand away from Enoch’s desperate grasp. “Enoch’s humiliation was so sharp and painful that he turned around three times before he realized which direction he wanted to go in. Then he ran off into the rain as fast as he could” (182). This exchange should be noted for its irony as Enoch’s plan is completely reversed; he goes from enemy to friend and from the insulter to the insulted. As a great despiser of animals who is overjoyed at the thought of insulting a famous ape, he momentarily becomes an admirer and entertains

the thought of becoming friends with Gongga. Gongga, however, obliterates Enoch's intentions when he humiliates him in front of the crowd by running him off.

This strange encounter with Gongga both devastates and inspires Enoch. On the one hand, the prospect of making friends with a minor celebrity thoroughly excites Enoch. But Gongga—I'm now referring to the man within the suit—as just another alienated citizen of Taulkinham, isn't in the public arena of his own will or on his own terms; a fact that makes him inclined to refuse any solicitation that seeks to further impose upon his personal life and unwilling to participate in what could be considered as an authentic social exchange. On the other hand, despite Enoch's painful rejection and public humiliation, he gleans something from this experience. The encounter with Gongga validates the promises tacitly made by the media and advertising industry: material objects, like a gorilla suite, can have a transformative effect on the way society perceives the bearer of said objects. The prospect that fashionable clothing and consumer goods can radically transform a mean-spirited individual who would callously tell someone to "go to hell" into a celebrity that people can't wait to meet excites Enoch, because it suggests that he too can undergo the same transformation. Before the encounter with Gongga, Enoch could only begin to make the most tenuous cognitive connection between the material distinction provided by consumer goods and the way they facilitate social integration; the idea had to gestate for while before it could bloom into a fully actualized objective. But soon after their meeting, Enoch realizes that he too might be able to use material objects to undergo the transformation from a "damp-haired pimpled boy" (38) with unclear ambitions to a confident and venerated celebrity. Enoch's entire story arc is an incubation period for this development and its eventual frustration.

Enoch's desire for companionship has a strong impact on how he responds to images presented by the media and advertisements. According to C. Wright Mills, the displacement and isolation experienced by individuals in the modern urban environment "makes [them] excellent material for synthetic molding at the hands of popular culture—print, film, radio, and television" (xvi). Indeed, Enoch's failure to properly anchor himself in an authentic community creates a peculiar kind of susceptibility that leaves him vulnerable to the suggestivity of any sort of marketing that utilizes social distinction as a sales tactic. In the final chapter before Enoch's disappearance, O'Connor reveals Enoch's ambitions:

He wanted to become something. He wanted to better his condition until it was the best. He wanted to be THE young man of the future, like the ones in the insurance ads. He wanted, some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand. (191)

In this particular mode of advertising, the advertiser tacitly suggests that their product will distinguish the consumer and improve their natural demeanor—McLuhan points to the "men of distinction" ad campaign of Lord Calvert (56), but this method is ubiquitous throughout advertising, whether the product is ladies' stockings or automobiles—which will ultimately make them more socially desirable. Because Enoch lacks any sort of meaningful relationship, he is more prone to respond to the tacit promises made by advertisements, suggesting that he can mend or supplement his social deficiency through material distinction provided by savvy consumerism. We see, for instances, that Enoch desires to be like "THE young man of the future" depicted in an insurance ad. Like the image of "THE young man of the future," who seems to have pulled himself up by his

bootstraps and bettered “his condition until it was the best,” Enoch also wants to achieve a new level of social competence through savvy purchases. He too hopes to better himself through consumerism and the acquisition of commodities that confer material distinction; a distinction that he believes will end his long spell as a *persona non grata* and attracts crowds “of people” who will want “to shake his hand.”

The fulfilled, joyous individuals represented in advertisements lead Enoch to believe that sociability and happiness is simply a matter of consumption, and even when consumption fails to produce the intended social effect, the possessions garnered will at least produce material satisfaction (see the discussion on the potato peeler), so it appears to be a win-win situation. The two fictitious ads that seem to captivate Enoch the most, the insurance ad and the peeler demonstration, are clever illustrations of the insubstantiality of advertisers claims and promises, because O’Connor reveals the ideological absurdity inherent in their presentation. If she had chosen a clothing item or a game of some sort, it would be much easier to see the social appeal, but with kitchenware and insurance, the social appeal is laughably absent—after all, I’m sure we are all well aware of how much cultural prestige is garnered every time we purchase a really smart life insurance policy or comprehensive auto coverage, no?

With burning resentment for celebrated animals, elated with comic possibility after reading the newspaper at the Paris Diner, and inspired by the “THE young man of the future” advertisement, Enoch decides to pilfer the Gongga gorilla suit and thereby hopes to acquire the sociability that goes with it. O’Connor describes Enoch’s face “working with envy” (195) as he sneaks into production company vehicle to steal the gorilla suit. After a brief scuffle, Enoch slips out the back door of the truck at a railroad

crossing and stumbles “off toward the woods” (196) where he buries the vestiges of his old self: “he dug rapidly until he had made a trench about a foot long and a foot deep. Then he placed the stack of clothes in it and stood aside to rest a second. Burying his clothes was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn’t need them any more” (196). Enoch burns “with the intensest kind of happiness” as he eagerly anticipates the actualization of his new persona. However, when Enoch approaches a young couple, he’s shocked to discover that his horrifying appearance sends them “screaming down the highway” (198).

Bacon notes the importance of this transformation or, more accurately, degeneration when he suggests that the promise of self-actualization implied by the advertising and marketing strategies that target hapless individuals like Enoch tend to obliterate rather than shore up one’s selfhood. “The narrative,” Bacon says, “shows only the loss of individual identity. Enoch will be obscured, not improved, by the commercial image” (32). Bacon reminds us that once Enoch dons the suit, the text no longer refers him by his name or pronouns acknowledging his gender: “a black heavier shaggier figure replaced his. For an instant, it had two heads, one light and one dark, but after a second, it pulled the dark back head over the other and corrected this” (WB 197); that is, when Enoch buries his old clothes, he also buries his humanity. The transformation into animality negates the possibility for a robust sense of freedom, because Enoch relinquishes his ability to exercise his freedom on metaphysical grounds. And if that weren’t tragic enough, his transformation also fails to provide him with the celebrity status and easy friendships that he had expected. The message of consumerism, as he

understands it, promised to integrate him socially if he acquired the right commodities, but once acquired, Enoch has become as grotesque and repulsive as ever.

As part of the satire, O'Connor uses Enoch's story arc to illustrate the absurdity in confusing consumerism with self-improvement. While most consumers probably accept as reasonable the claim that their lives can be improved through their participation in consumer capitalism Enoch's story not only renders this claim impotent, but it also demonstrates the exact opposite. By participating in consumerism, Enoch doesn't improve his social status or enhance his autonomy by any measure. Instead, acting on the promises of consumer culture and the advertising industry literally leads him down a path that reduces his humanity, sociability, and freedom—everything advertisements had promised him.

*

In the end, we can only truly understand *Wise Blood* if we understand the basic oppositions that structure its narrative. O'Connor ultimately wants to juxtapose Enoch's travestied version of wise blood with a Christian model; she wants to show her audience an alternative to the consumerism of secular culture and Enoch serves as a foil to help make her diamond shine. So if O'Connor wants to talk about freedom, she needs to show us unfreedom; if she wants to talk about community she needs to show us isolation and alienation; if she wants to evoke truth, she does so by way of illusion, and Enoch always serves the latter's purpose. Enoch would like to believe the editors at *Life*; he more than any other character would like to believe that prosperity will produce a literature of joy and contentment; but he need not look any further than his own life to understand that material affluence cannot improve the kind of existential poverty that O'Connor

addresses. Without the meaningful social institutions and spiritual horizons that guard against hegemonic manipulation and exploitation, that fortify the individual's freedom beyond questions of fashion, greater access to material goods can only pacify human discontent. While the theological conception of wise blood that O'Connor advocates will help individuals understand his desires and make them manifest, consumerism, as the secular parody of wise blood, mystifies the true nature of desire and will ultimately defer its realization.

“No One Was Paying Any Attention to the Sky”:

A Dialectics Journey of Faith and Literary Form

The third chapter of *Wise Blood*, provisionally titled “The Peeler” in its earliest drafts, depicts a confrontation between a nameless street vendor and Asa Hawks, the street preacher. The narration describes a small crowd gathering around the vendor’s peeler display, a “pyramid of green cardboard boxes” that resembles a kind of sacrilegious consumer “altar” (38). The vendor appears to be a friendly, good-natured individual as he waggishly ribs his audience, Enoch in particular, hoping to inspire them to purchase his wares. The vendor’s affability, however, quickly turns to irritation when Asa and Sabbath Hawks commandeer the crowd’s attention by handing out religious tracts and soliciting the audience for donations. Asa admonishes the audience members to “give a nickel if [they] won’t repent” (40). Asa’s presence begins to dissipate the crowd and distract those who remain. Upset, the vendor confronts Asa and complains that he’s been “running people off” from his promotion (40) and that he is unfairly exploiting his work: “I got these people together,” the vendor says, “how you think you can horn in?” (41). Asa simply ignores the vendor and continues to panhandle and hand out his tracts. Infuriated, the vendor flagrantly accosts Asa, “I’d like to know who the hell you think you are!” (40). As the vendor steps out from behind his makeshift altar to confront the preacher, he accidentally upsets his bucket of potatoes, increasing his rage. In sheer desperation and anger he screams, “these damn Jesus fanatics [...] These goddam Communist foreigners!” (40).

During the Cold War-era, to accuse someone of being a Communist in the US was a serious accusation that often carried with it grave consequences. In public discourse, to be labeled a Communist suggested that one was anti-American and implied a clandestine otherness. The fear that Russian's would infiltrate the US produced a hysterical atmosphere where a public accusation of this sort could ruin one's social life and career. With such an anti-Communist agenda here in the States, the street vendor's accusation that Asa is a "Communist foreigner," associated in this scene with "Jesus fanatics" as well, isn't just an insult, but a public denunciation. While the accusation that Asa's ministry is in some way associated or in collusion with conspiratorial, Communist forces seeking to undermine American Capitalism is rather laughable, John Lance Bacon's book *Flannery O'Connor and Cold War Culture* suggests that this connection was more common than one might think. Bacon argues that various Christian sects as well as intellectuals of her era shared a common propensity for dissent and were less likely to espouse a faith in the American way of life. The spiritual concerns of socially aware religious communities in the United States often opposed the national and economic agenda of the US during Cold War and religious leaders were publically scrutinized if their allegiance to the US seemed questionable. During this era, many Americans particularly questioned Catholic loyalty to the US, due to Catholics' allegiance to the Vatican. The universal claims of the Catholic Church and its headquarters in Rome appeared to pose a conflict of interest with American Democracy and Capitalism, a conflict that some Americans believed might threaten national security.¹ During the 1950's, this antagonism between Capitalist ideology and theology

¹ In a later scene, O'Connor illustrates the widespread suspicion of Catholics when she

brought more than a few spiritual leaders before the House of Un-American Committee, which effectively cemented the opposition between the spiritual life of the Church and the economic life of modern, secular society in O'Connor's mind and fiction.

The third chapter not only reiterates the forces at play in O'Connor's conceptualization of wise blood, but also illustrates how the Cold War constituencies express this opposition. Cold War-era Capitalism felt threatened by fundamentalist Christians who were unwilling to admit that American life was superlative due to its implementation of capitalist policies. As a result, the theological opposition to Capitalism, according to Bacon, "seemed to promote the opposite ideology, Communism" (63). O'Connor illustrates the social effects of this bias in *Wise Blood* when the overly simplified binary dualism of the Cold War-era leads the street vendor to align the critical tendencies of Protestant fundamentalism with the subversive Communist ilk in a single breath. On the other hand, Southerners, who O'Connor admits may no longer be "Christ-centered," but are most certainly "Christ-haunted" (MM 44), feel that the increasing industrialization of the US economy threatens to end their way of life. Not only is Capitalism profaning their religious institutions, transforming them into a feel-good, self-help industry of inane sweetness (i.e. the ministry of Hoover Shoates) that concedes its authority to the fluctuating morality of the age, but the promises of Consumer Capitalism also attempt to rival the consolation that the church wants to extend to alienated souls in the urban landscape. For O'Connor, the continuing success of Capitalism in the form of mass consumerism and conformity meant that society would also continue to suffer from manipulation and a lack of authentic freedom. Regardless of

has Mrs. Flood accuse Hazel of being an "agent of the pope" (225).

national and global politics, she feels that the only way to remedy modern society's lack of freedom is to expand its definition of freedom beyond economic, psychological, and political terms; she believes that the only authentic freedom we can achieve is through a recognition of the essential mystery of a spiritual universe and humanity's desire to engage with its divine origin.

Enoch, as I've suggested in my first chapter, debases the fundamental human desire for communion with the divine into a desire for celebrity and consumer goods. His version of wise blood is an introjection the advertising industry's promise to remedy his social isolation through increased participation in consumerism. However, the advertising industry's manipulative tactics lead him into an endless cycle of artificially produced needs, demands, and desires that continually defer his social and spiritual fulfillment. Ultimately, Enoch renounces his own humanity to become an ape as an effort to attain celebrity. In this final transformation, the instrumental application of rationality by the advertising industry doesn't produce the a well-adjusted young man depicted in their ad campaigns; instead it produces an irrational outcome, whereby the rational attempts to supplement and improve his humanity actually precipitate its ruin. In this grotesque conclusion, which resides somewhere between tragedy and comedy, Enoch's mournful bellows serve as warning to those who might be tricked by consumerism's Circean allure.

In this chapter, I will illustrate how O'Connor promotes Hazel's *authentic* wise blood, which is influenced by the Christian upbringing of his youth, as the preferable alternative to Enoch's *artificial* version. While Enoch ultimately loses his freedom and selfhood by following the directives of consumer culture, Hazel "is saved by virtue of

having wise blood; it's too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ" (HB 350). His wise blood and desire for truth lead him beyond the banalities of bourgeois life, restoring mystery, and, therefore, the possibility of freedom to what is otherwise a mechanistic world determined by psychological and economic forces. Although consumer culture seduces Hazel for a time, the fragile commodities that it promotes leave Hazel seeking more durable and timeless solutions to his existential crisis. Hazel is a quester and his journey has a dialectical structure leads him from the naïve faith of his youth, into and through apostasy and nihilism, and, finally, leads "him the long way (or maybe it's really the short way) around to Redemption again" (CW 920).

Through Hazel's conversion and pursuit of Jesus, he is able to extricate himself from consumer culture and pursue what is considered to be a freer, more fulfilling life. However, his experiences as a Christian towards the end of the novel ultimately fail to represent a truly Christian life worthy of its name. Besides Enoch, O'Connor juxtaposes Hazel with the life of his archetypal predecessor, St. Paul, from whom many of the novel's tropes are derived, but Hazel's experience of the Christian life falls drastically short due to his violent self-immolation, isolation, and lack of love. While Hazel, as "a kind of Protestant saint" (HB 69), doesn't receive O'Connor's full endorsement due the Protestant characteristics of his faith, within the structure of the novel he functions as a kind of allegorical, Christian hero lauded mostly for his progress towards a Christian life not as its perfected ideal. O'Connor justifies the wild, comic, and grotesque aspects of her fiction as literary devices that capture the attention of believers and nonbelievers alike, not for their inherent literary amusements, but as part of a greater project of Christian witness. By depicting the world of *Wise Blood* through grotesque conventions,

O'Connor shows her audience that society not only has need for traditional, Christian ideals, but that they are still in reach, even if, like Hazel, they fail to become perfect representatives.

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Richard Giannone opens his essay "Dark Night, Dark Faith" with a frightful description of an emaciated figure collapsed in a watery ditch. The man blindly struggles towards an edifice under construction, but, half-dead with influenza, he can barely move forward. Two fattened officers of the law approach him, club him, and load him in the back of their squad car where he dies from the blow to his head. The broken and blinded man, of course, is our protagonist, Hazel Motes. Giannone describes the basic dynamic structure of O'Connor's fiction as "a cavity" or ditch that "gapes in every O'Connor story and in both [*Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*]" (9). Unlike Dante's descent into Hell, where the protagonist ventures into the dark night of the soul intent upon self-discovery and divine revelation, her protagonists more often than not stumble into the sloughs of despond blindly and experience divine mystery therein like a bump on the head. No would-be atheist or bumptious reprobate can weather the journey through the gloomy valleys and darkened ditches of O'Connor's fiction. She stages this trope of degradation, revelation, and death so often that Frederick Crews, in a somewhat disparaging tone, describes the "narrowness of emphasis and predictability of technique" (145) in her greater body of work as "performing the same religious maneuver—namely, a humbling of secular egoism to make way for a sudden infusion of God's grace" (146).

We can divide Hazel's journey into three distinct parts. His story begins in the formative years of his youth when he maintains a naive, yet distorted, faith in Christianity

presented by his family. After he is drafted by the military, his ties with his family and home are sundered. In the absence of his family, the military effectively re-socializes Hazel and liberates him from the cumbersome fundamentalist Christian upbringing of his youth. Once he is freed from the symbolic order established by his family, he begins to substitute the symbols of his religious life with consumer goods, in particular his car. He also feels compelled to liberate others from their own oppressive religious perspectives and begins an atheistic ministry to share his message of existential liberation. However, Hazel's overzealousness turns his message of liberation into an equally oppressive form of militant atheism, which ends in murder. However, it is not until after a police officer destroys Hazel's prized possession, which he had imbued with his social, spiritual, and personal well-being, that he realizes how unstable the foundations of his faith in existentialism, materialism, and empiricism had been. Once his faith is compromised, he returns to the assurance of a Christian life strengthened by his encounter with existential doubt.

In the first chapter of the novel, O'Connor establishes Hazel's anxiety regarding death: an anxiety that motivates much of the novel's action. On the train to Taulkinham, Hazel recalls the deaths of five of his closest family members. In addition to the death of two younger brothers, Hazel also loses his mother, father and grandfather. He imagines the souls of his family members living on past the death of their bodies, trapped in their graves, and immersed in an unending darkness. Like his family members, he fears the prospect of burial and cannot help but wonder, "what if he had been in [the casket] and they had shut it on him" (WB 20). While considering what death must have been like for his relatives, he decides to simulate his own entombment. Hazel closes the curtain to his

berth, extinguishing all the lights, until “in his half-sleep he thought where he was lying was like a coffin” (19). It doesn’t take long before terror induces him to call out: “‘Jesus,’ Haze said, ‘Jesus’” (27). This utterance could be understood as a mere blasphemy, which we can associate with Hazel’s evolving ministry, or a momentary relapse into the faith of his youth. I would stress the latter interpretation, but, either way, Hazel connects death with the figure of Christ.

The berth episode also includes a brief glimpse into Hazel’s early life that provides us with insight into his naïve, yet unorthodox understanding of the Christian religion. Hazel, like many of the most truculent opponents of Christianity or other religious faiths, has suffered from abuses in its name. In his youth, he directly identifies with the doctrines espoused by his mother and grandfather. Before being drafted by the army, Hazel recalls that he had desired “to be a preacher like his grandfather” and carry on the family legacy (21). But his grandfather’s message is not quite the good news of the gospels, but a traumatic vision of sin and degradation, which produces a merciless rendition of Christ that haunts Hazel’s young mind. He envisions the “soul-hungry” Jesus as a “wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark” (22). The old man often used Hazel as an example human corruption, hauling presenting the boy before his haphazard congregation and rhetorically asking, “did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, Jesus would die ten million deaths before He would let him lose his soul? [...] Jesus would not let him forget he was redeemed. Jesus would have him in the end” (22). This heartless characterization of young Hazel as a wretched sinner is more than just an cruel exemplification of original sin; it stems

from the grandfather's uncanny recognition of himself in the young boy, whose visage "seemed to mock him" (22). These insensitive and very public admonishments leave an indelible mark on the boy that he will persist into his adult life.² With the unwarranted guilt, shame, and resentment issued forth from his grandfather, Hazel not only mirrors his grandfather's resentment back towards its source, but he also projects that same resentment onto the Christ that his grandfather claims to represent. Hazel comes to the conclusion that this ape-like Jesus is best to be avoided, and "the way to avoid Jesus [is] to avoid sin" (22). While the guilt inspired by his grandfather prematurely forces him to acknowledge a need for redemption, the menacing, ape-like depiction of Jesus will eventually lead him to seek his redemption by other means.

At the age of eighteen, the army drafts Hazel for military service in WWII: an event that uproots him from his home and negates his Christian beliefs. Up until this point, Hazel still plans on becoming a "preacher of the gospel" (WB 24). He interprets the war "as a trick to lead him into temptation" but after contemplating his options, he decides that he can trust "his power to resist evil; it was something he had inherited, like his face, from his grandfather" (23). Hazel assures himself that he will not "have his soul damned by the government or by any foreign place it sent him to" (23); and that "no priest taking orders from no pope [is] going to tamper with his soul" (24). But away from home, solely in the company of non-believers with only his Bible and his mother's

² On the train, Hazel removes the black hat so often mistaken for a preacher's and the narration remarks that "his hair looked as if it had been permanently flattened under the heavy hat" (4). In another instance Asa also draws our attention to the abiding influence of Hazel's grandfather when he says, "Some preacher has left his mark on you [...] Did you follow for me to take it off or give you another one?" (51).

glasses to guard his spirituality, Hazel no longer has the social network (whether familial or as a community of believers) to support his religious beliefs.

The military exposes Hazel to the social and spiritual degradation that many associate with the existential crisis that pervaded life surrounding the Great Wars. In the organized meaninglessness of this total institution, which appropriated his body and “sent him halfway around the world and forgot about him” (24), Hazel has plenty of time for reflection. Before he had been displaced by the military, Hazel had always assumed there were only two options, either to lead a moral life as dictated by the Bible or to become its antithesis, but during his service “he had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it wasn’t there,” and it occurs to him that there might be an “opportunity here to get rid of [his soul] without corruption, to be converted to nothing instead of to evil...when he was thoroughly convinced, he saw that this was something he had always known” (24). According to Hazel’s rationale, if his life and his goals can be impeded by the military, maybe no essential meaning exists. The radical shift in values that took place during the war provides Hazel with the opportunity to simply dismiss the legacy he had always assumed he must fulfill.

Once Hazel feels that he has successfully converted himself to nothing, he reinterprets the “deep black wordless conviction” (WB 22) for Jesus and the “nameless unplaced guilt” (63) of his oedipal desires, which might also be interpreted as participation in the original sin, as a “longing for home; it had nothing to do with Jesus” (24):

All he wanted was to get back to Eastrod, Tennessee. The black Bible and his mother’s glasses were still in the bottom of his duffel bag. He didn’t

read any book now but kept the Bible because it had come from home. He kept the glasses in case his vision should ever become dim. (25)

As Hazel reassigns worldly meaning to his spiritually imbued possessions, the Bible, representing the locus of the spiritual and material world, and his mother's spectacles, also representing a kind of spiritual apprehension, are relegated to merely material keepsakes of home. However, the reduction of life to sheer material existence leaves Hazel temporarily displaced in the world.

It's after Hazel returns home from the war that he begins his atheist ministry of the Church Without Christ—a clear indication that he has defected from the Christian faith. In his sermons, Hazel adopts the role a liberator as he apes the existentialist motto “existence precedes essence,” which is intended to awaken his audience to a wider horizon of freedom. His message of liberation, however, also betrays his nihilistic tendencies: “where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place” (165). Hazel attempts to offer his audience a demystified vision of the world that will re-instill the autonomy of each individual. Similar to Enlightenment and Existentialist figures like Descartes, Kant, Nietzsche, and Sartre, Hazel wants to achieve this autonomy by reducing the world to facticity, material existence without pre-given essences or aims, thereby allowing individuals to determine the meaning of objects and, ultimately, their own lives. More specifically, Hazel levels his attack at the Christian worldview, which asserts that nature is a value-filled order and humanity, as part of this order, has a predetermined goal to realize God's plan on earth. For Hazel, this goal or place-to-be, as is often repeated throughout the novel, “is no good

unless you can get away from it,” unless each individual can determine for him or herself to inhabit that space. However, the freedom that Hazel professes betrays the anxiety and dread of the modern secular age. For some, existentialism’s new freedom of being may liberate them from repressive social strictures and narrow modes of thought, but for others, particularly those of religious faith, it often tends to upset their constructed order of being, leaving in its wake a palpable feeling of displacement and homelessness in the world. Hazel’s sermon hints at this dreadful disinheritance: “Where is there a place for you to be? *No place*” [emphasis added].

In chapter four, O’Connor illustrates both Hazel’s attempt to reinvest his life with symbolic meaning as well as his vulnerability to the suggestiveness of consumer culture when he awakes with the compulsion to purchase a car: “the thought was full grown in his head when he woke up, and he didn’t think of anything else. He had never thought before of buying a car; he had never even wanted one before” (67). Hazel’s impulse leads him to a downtown car lot where he purchases a “high rat-colored machine” known as the Essex. As a classic symbol of masculinity, independence, and freedom, car ownership holds the potential to increase Hazel’s autonomy and the Essex is a manifestation of that will. After negotiating a price with the car salesman, Hazel feels the need to explain his compulsion—a gesture that is a bit out of his character: “I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me... I ain’t got any place to be” (73).³ This strange desire and unusual rationalization can be associated with the sudden comprehension that his

³ It’s rare for Haze to explain his actions and, if the attempt is made, it is often done so begrudgingly. For instance, both Mrs. Hitchcock and Leora Watts have to cajole Hazel to speak; he is usually very guarded when it comes to explaining his actions and the most he’ll offer is a vague answer like, “[I’m] going to Taulkinham [...] Don’t know nobody there, but I’m going to do some things” (13).

former home in Eastrod, Tennessee “was only a shell” and “that there was nothing left [of it] but the skeleton of a house” (26). The Essex becomes another surrogate in the succession starting with the substitution of home for Jesus, and now that Hazel’s home can no longer function without its social and spiritual content, he’s forced to make another amendment.

The Essex has the potential to solve Hazel’s spiritual and spatial displacement as it renders the problems of finding him “a place to be” insignificant. Like his Bible and mother’s glasses, as keepsakes from home, which are easily packed away in his duffel bag and carted around with him, the portable contents of home find their complement with the Essex—a kind of mobile home. O’Connor further develops the concept of the car as a mobile home when she describes Hazel encountering other vehicles on the road: “A black pick-up truck turned off a side road in front of [Hazel]. On the back of it an iron bed and a chair and a table were tied, and on top of them, a crate of barred-rock chickens” (74-75). Considering the contents the truck, the occupants appear to be in the process of moving, but for Hazel, this sight simply reaffirms his belief that the motor vehicle can function as a home.

If Hazel’s earlier conclusions suggesting that his longing for Jesus was really just a longing for home, then statements like “nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (113) or “nobody with a good car needs to worry about anything” (206), seem substantially more significant. Hazel reduces life to an impoverished materiality, disavowing the efficacious signs of grace present in a sacramental world. In this singular gesture to rid the world of its spiritual content, Hazel projects his displaced spiritual longings into material objects like his mother’s glasses, the Bible, and the Essex. The

Essex in particular becomes a fetishized object—his own personal savior-commodity. Hazel believes that no one with a good car needs anything, not the support of a community, a family, or a religion; it essentially guarantees Hazel's independence. While the road genre permits this faith in the car as a technological aid for one's journey, O'Connor often depicts the misapplication of faith in technology and material objects as an obstacle to the protagonist's salvation.⁴

While Hazel vigorously attempts to cleanse the spiritual symbolism from his life with existentialism, O'Connor contrasts his efforts by constructing a spiritual landscape just beyond the limits of Taulkinham. The plethora of trivialities and trinkets on continuous display impedes the vision of Taulkinhamites to the extent that they are unable to notice the images of a far greater world that O'Connor (or God) literally constructs beyond the city's edge. As the citizens walk the streets of the city "to see what was for sale," off in the distance, O'Connor describes a spiritual world coming into being:

The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. (37)

⁴ Joy Hulga is spiritually impeded by her prosthetic leg in "Good Country People," Rayber is impeded by his general faith in technological progress in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and the impetus for the tragedy in "Displaced Person" involves Mrs. McIntyre's need to increase crop production by hiring Mr. Guizac, a Polish refugee, to operate mechanical farm implements.

However, none of the characters in the novel seems aware of the proximity of this spiritual world, for “no one was paying any attention to the sky” (37). The spiritual construction site contrasts Hazel’s attempt to reassign the value and meaning of objects in his life; the telos evinced by the celestial vision dwarfs Hazel’s conceited efforts, suggesting their futility and eventual failure.

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Before Hazel can return to the Christian faith, there must first be an event that humbles his secular egoism or, as Richard Giannone describes it, he must enter the “inky ditch filled with judgment and meaning” (9). This chastening requires that Hazel be stripped of his sanctimonious nihilism by recognizing its inconsistencies—or at least the inconsistencies in his ministry. Hazel must first encounter the three spurious Christians who challenge him to avoid worldly impediments that might detour him from the truth. After the spurious Christians refine his ministry, the Essex, as the locus of his faith in existentialist facticity, empiricism, and materialism, must be destroyed in order to force Hazel to seek out a truth that transcends the material world.

There can be very little doubt about Hazel’s nihilism in *Wise Blood*; it is unmistakable and conveyed by his earliest encounters. Hazel’s first encounter in Taulkinham is with a taxicab driver who mistakes him for a preacher: “listen” Hazel says to the driver, “get this: I don’t believe in anything” (32). Initially, however, Hazel’s seemingly nihilistic sentiments are more atheistic or simply anti-Christian in nature: “the only way to the truth is through blasphemy” (148). Hazel harbors such strong anti-Christian sentiments that he is willing to go as far as renouncing the empirical faith, which he will later espouse as foundational to his ministry of the Church Without Christ:

“do you think I believe in Jesus? [...] Well I wouldn’t even if He existed. Even if He was on this train” (16). His proclamation to believe in nothing is a rhetorical renunciation of Christianity similar to the way his ministry prophesies the rhetorical *new jesus*: “‘there’s no such a thing or person,’ Haze said. ‘It wasn’t nothing but a way to say a thing’” (159). In other words, Hazel isn’t an epistemological nihilist when he says he wouldn’t believe in Jesus even if he if he could validate Christ’s existence with his own eyes; he is an existential nihilist; Christ wouldn’t, by the simple fact of his existence, provide any meaning, direction or purpose to his life or, in his opinion, anyone else’s:

If Jesus had redeemed you, what difference would it make to you? You wouldn’t do nothing about it. Your faces wouldn’t move, neither this way nor that, and if it was three crosses there and Him hung on the middle one, that one wouldn’t mean no more to you and me than the other two. (140)

Hazel wants to identify Christianity as a social construction, because this identification would reduce it to just another temporal social system easily invalidated by cultural fluctuation in moral and spiritual attitudes.

Hazel’s sermons, when not expressly about blasphemy, often hinge on the need for empirical evidence as opposed to lofty, conceptual discourse on the nature of man. He believes religious abstraction and metaphysical speculation is a power discourse, which he expresses in offensive terms: “Jesus is a trick on niggers” (72).⁵ Through his ministry, Hazel intends to liberate the people of Taulkinham from their false notions

⁵ Later in the novel, Hazel will even reject psychological abstractions such as the conscience (166).

about Christ and sin by convincing his audience to reject abstract notions in the name of empiricism:

In yourself right now is all the place you've got. If there were any Fall, look there, if there was any Redemption, look there, and if you expect any Judgment, look there, because they all three will have to be in your time and in your body and where in your time and in your body can they be?

(166)

Hazel wants to void Christian concepts—such as the fall, redemption, and judgment—of any signification; as his demand for empiricism increases so does his need for the nullification of abstractions. He tells a young profligate whom he expects to proselytize, it is “not right to believe anything you [can't] see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth” (206). For Hazel, empiricism and, consequently, materialism are the only consistent and justifiable truths in the world—all else is folly.

However, the inconsistency of truth Hazel perceives in the Christian tradition is not with any inconsistency he finds in the Christian doctrine itself; rather, it is an inconsistency or, more accurately, hypocrisy, that he finds in the representatives of the Christian faith. For Hazel, there is a “thing in his mind [that says] the truth [doesn't] contradict itself,” but the spurious Christians that he encounters are constantly contradicting the Christian faith that they espouse (122). As a moral purist, Hazel finds the false Christians and preachers that he encounters intolerable, because while they profess their faith openly, they are secretly pragmatic opportunists using the guise of faith to benefit themselves. Hazel encounters a set of spurious Christians who inspire him to continually refine his own atheistic ministry until it has been completely negated. Hazel

first encounters a timid Christian, Asa Hawks, the blind street preacher, whose resolve and vitality seems to continually wane. Next he encounters the huckster, Hoover Shoats, a guitar-playing, broadcast evangelist, whose only interest is money. But it's the travestied Christian, Solace Layfield, Shoats' patsy prophet, who unintentionally makes a mockery of Hazel's ministry, leaving him with two options: to either abandon his ministry, because he is no longer able to preserve the consistency between his secular sermons and his actions, or to commit murder in order to maintain the consistency between them.

Asa Hawks, more than any other figure, functions as Hazel's rival; he is the closest thing to a theist that can challenge Hazel's atheism. Asa, however, has a history of inconstancy with his religious commitments. Hazel discovers that the marks around Asa's eyes are scars from a botched publicity stunt. According to a newspaper article that Asa shows Hazel, he had wanted to gain some notoriety as an evangelist, so he put out a press statement claiming that he would blind himself to "justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him" (112). Another article, which Asa keeps hidden, describes how, when the time came:

He had thrust his hands into the bucket of wet lime and streaked them down his face; but he hadn't been able to let any of it get into his eyes. He had been possessed of as many devils as were necessary to do it, but at that instant, they disappeared, and he saw himself standing there as he was. (114)

Hazel himself discovers Asa's cowardice one night after he sneaks into the preacher's room; he exchanges a long furtive glance with Asa and realizes that the preacher's blindness is a shameful hoax.

While fraudulently posing as a blind man seems rather transgressive for a supposed preacher, what is worse, as far as Hazel is concerned, is Asa's indifference or lack of commitment to his spiritual calling. Like the other hucksters and street vendors in Taulkinham, Asa is out there to make a buck and preaching is just another way to gather loose change: "wouldn't you rather have me beg than preach?" Asa says, "come on and give up a nickel if you won't repent" (41). Hazel expects Asa to save his soul; he expects to have some sort of public confrontation or debate like the one he tries to instigate in front of the movie theater (55); he expects Asa to try to protect his daughter from the militant atheist attempting to seduce her; but instead, Asa does just the opposite, abandoning his daughter with Hazel and refusing to engage him on religious matters other than to say, "I can't save you but you can save yourself" (112). While Asa's statement is true according to the Christian faith (i.e. only you can achieve your own salvation through Christ), Hazel perceives the preacher's dismissive response as an unwillingness to seriously engage anyone on the terms of his ministry. Infuriated by the preacher's lackluster commitment to his vocation, Hazel goes to his house and demands, "what kind of preacher are you... not to see if you can save my soul?" (108). In his spirited moments, Asa will make challenging statements to Hazel, like "some preacher has left his mark on you... did you follow for me to take it off or give you another one?" (51), but the truth is that he is too lazy to administer any prophetic chastening. Despite

the acrimony between the two men, Asa's flaccid ministry inspires Hazel to conduct his own ministry with more conviction.

Hoover Shoats and Solace Layfield, the other false preachers in the novel, go into business together in order to capitalize on Hazel's concepts of the Church Without Christ and its representative figure, the new Jesus. Hoover Shoats, the radio personality also known as Onnie Jay Holy, is described as "an ex-preacher turned cowboy, or an ex-cowboy turned mortician. He was not handsome but under his smile, there was an honest look that fitted into his face like a set of false teeth" (148). Whatever honesty Shoats possesses, it is evidently artificial. Shoats is a silver-tongued opportunist, plain and simple, and when he discovers Hazel preaching about his new Jesus and the Church Without Christ, he immediately recognizes the modern tone of the message and its potential profitability. "This church is up-to-date!" Shoats informs a makeshift crowd, "when you're in this church you can know that there's nothing or nobody ahead of you, nobody knows nothing you don't know, all the cards are on the table" (153). Shoats believes that Hazel's Church of blasphemy is the latest model; all it needs is a better marketing strategy: "what you need is an artist-type to work with you" (157).

The problem with the artistic flourishes that Shoats proposes is that they subvert Hazel's overall message in an effort to improve its marketability. On their first encounter, Shoats tries to illustrate the effectiveness of Hazel's new church by constructing a fictional account of how he himself had been transformed by its empowering message. Shoats claims, "I was ready to hang myself or to despair completely. Not even my own dear mother loved me, and it wasn't because I wasn't sweet inside, it was because I never known how to make the natural sweetness inside me

show” (150). Not only is this description of his life fictional, but he constructs a narrative that suggests that Hazel’s ministry had transformed his life:

“But all the time that I was ready to hang myself or to despair completely, I was sweet inside, like ever’body else, and I only needed something to bring it out. I only needed a little help, friends.

“Then I met this Prophet here,” he said, pointing at Haze on the nose of the car. “That was two months ago, folks, that I heard how he was out to help me, how he was preaching the Church of Christ Without Christ, the church that was going to get a new jesus to help me bring my sweet nature into the open where ever’body could enjoy it. That was two months ago, friends, and now you wouldn’t know me for the same man.” (151).

There’s no doubt that this narrative is quite flattering, even if it is untrue, but Hazel cannot promote his ministry under the pretense of a lie, otherwise his ministry would suffer from inconsistencies similar to those of Asa Hawks’ ministry. While it’s obvious that the crowd responds well to Shoats’ narrative, it is much more important for Hazel to maintain his honesty: “this man is not true,” Hazel protests, “I never saw him before tonight” (152). Shoats continues to save face before the crowd, deftly weaving Hazel’s protest and the crowds jeers into his sermon. Once the crowd is warmed up, Shoats begins to solicit donations and register the names of the donors. Hazel again protests, “‘Listen!’ he shouted. ‘It don’t cost you any money to know the truth! You can’t know it for money!’” (154). Hazel loathes to see his message of existential liberation vulgarized by a lot of nonsense and sweet talk, so when Shoats proposes they become partners, Hazel not only rejects his offer, but also injures him in the process by slamming

his thumb in the door of the Essex. Rather than desist in his pursuit, Shoats, as Steve Pinkerton aptly puts it, “responds by channeling the free-market ethos” (456). Shoats promises Hazel that he’s made himself and his Church Without Christ a new rival, the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ: “you watch out, friend. I’m going to run you out of business. I can get my own new Jesus and I can get Prophets for peanuts, you hear? Do you hear me, friend?” (159).

In an effort to capitalize on Hazel’s ministry, Shoats finds a patsy to dress like Hazel and imitate his sermons. Shoats believes that Hazel’s visage is intrinsically connected with the message of the new Jesus because it conveys sincerity, or, as Shoats puts it, “why, do you know who you put me in mind of when I first saw you? [...] Jesus Christ and Abraham Lincoln, friend” (155). Shoats hires Solace Layfield, a simple-minded father of six who had never considered that being a prophet “might be a dangerous job” (201). Shoats buys Layfield “a glare-blue suit and white hat” (167), just like Hazel’s, and has him recite a caricatured version of Hazel’s sermons: “the unredeemed are redeeming themselves and the new Jesus is at hand! Watch for this miracle! Help yourself to salvation in the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ!” (167).

When Hazel witnesses Shoats’ scheme, he experiences a shock of recognition:

He was so struck with how gaunt and thin he looked in the illusion that he stopped preaching. He had never pictured himself that way before. The man he saw was hollow-chested and carried his neck thrust forward and his arms by his side; he stood there as if he were waiting for some signal he was afraid he might not catch. (167)

It's unclear how Hazel had previously imagined himself before his audience, but surely it is nothing like the consumptive, scrawny figure of Solace Layfield, who mindlessly spouts nihilistic rhetoric. An animosity towards the double rises up in Hazel, just as it had in his grandfather.⁶ In the moments before Shoats and Layfield put on their first performance, Hazel testifies that the "conscience is a trick, [...] it don't exist though you may think it does, and if you think it does, you had best get it out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it's no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you" (166). When Hazel preaches that the conscience doesn't exist as an empirically verifiable entity, Layfield's presence as the mirror image of Hazel immediately refutes that claim. The conscience, as the self-reflective mental faculty, becomes a material object, flesh and blood, in the presence of Solace Layfield. In order for Hazel to maintain a consistent message in his ministry, he must follow his own advice and "hunt it down and kill it."

Layfield, the travesty of a Christian, like Asa Hawks and Hoover Shoats, forsakes his religious beliefs for economic gains (Shoats pays him three dollars an evening for his service), but unlike Asa, who seems well-intentioned, but unable to commit to his faith, or Shoats, whose only desire is to exploit the Christian faith, Layfield is actually a Christian, but doesn't seem to realize that his scripted speech is blasphemous. Hazel accuses Layfield of being a false preacher and miscarrying the message of the Church Without Christ: "you ain't true [...] What do you get up on top of a car and say you don't believe in what you do believe in for?" (203). While Layfield doesn't see the

⁶ "[Haze's grandfather] had a particular disrespect for him because his own face was repeated almost exactly in the child's and seem to mock him" (22).

significance of his actions, Hazel makes it clear: “you ain’t true,” because “you believe in Jesus” (203). Layfield protests that he “aint trying to mock [Hazel],” but, in order to maintain the consistency of his ministry, Hazel must follow through with his statement that if the conscience exists “you must hunt it down and kill it,” he must practice what he preaches. Hazel runs over Layfield twice with the Essex and then exits the car to witness his death. While Layfield makes a mock confession full of clichéd Southernisms about letting down his mother and informing the authorities about a moonshine operation in order to collect reward money, Hazel reprimands Layfield in the moments before his death: “two things I can’t stand [...] a man that ain’t true and one that mocks what is. You shouldn’t ever have tampered with me if you didn’t want what you got” (204). Untouched by Layfield’s confession or his pleas for the “hep” of Jesus (205), Hazel finishes the job by giving him a hard slap on the back.

Each of the spurious Christians help refine Hazel’s ministry and prepare him for his final conversion. Their questionable approaches to the Christian faith serve as negative examples that inspire Hazel to pursue the truth in a more honest manner. Hazel perceives their indifference, lack of commitment, pragmatism, and pursuit of economic gains as character flaws that impede and distort their apprehension of the truth. In turn, he makes an effort to avoid these pitfalls in order to ensure the success of his own journey. In the dialectic of his spiritual journey, Hazel is drawn to these figures because they nominally oppose his secularism, but at the same time, they also embody different negative characteristics of consumerism that help prepare Hazel for the destruction of the Essex and return to a Christianity strengthened by his existentialist doubt.

After Hazel murders Layfield for the sake of his ministry, he begins to take stock of his philosophical system. He quickly reviews the basic tenets of his philosophy with a gas station attendant, making sure to emphasize the refinements he's made over the last week: "Haze said it was not right to believe in anything you couldn't see or hold in your hands or test with your teeth. He said he had only a few days ago believed in blasphemy as the way to salvation, but that you couldn't even believe in that because then you were believing in something to blaspheme" (206). Hazel had up until this point included blasphemy as a major aspect of his ministry, but he has now come to the realization that if he maintains the tenets regarding blasphemy then he inadvertently validates Christianity by participating in its discourse. Between Hazel's mistaken comments about the conscience and blasphemy's dependence on Christian discourse, the only tenet he can still maintain is his faith in the Essex.

With blood on his hands, Hazel decides that it is time to move his ministry to another city. The attendant at the service station informs Hazel that the Essex, now the only remaining object of his faith, is in a poor state: "he said that there was a leak in the gas tank and two in the radiator and that the rear tire would probably last twenty miles if he went slow" (207). This news falls upon deaf ears, because Hazel has invested too much of himself in the car. In a state of denial, Hazel responds, "listen [...] this car is just beginning its life. A lightning bolt couldn't stop it!" (207). Hazel is subconsciously aware that the reality he has constructed is more fragile than he'd previously thought, but he labors to maintain it nonetheless. He wants the car to make him an independent or self-reliant individual who provides his own salvation. He has imbued the Essex with so much meaning that it essentially serves as the signifier of all his hopes and dreams: it

represents everything he has lost—his home, his youth, his family—it’s his protection and shell, his future, his coffin, and it’s even his workplace as it serves as his pulpit and the message of his ministry. The Essex, however, is ultimately an illusion that he cannot maintain. For O’Connor, the Essex represents a mental bondage that only an extreme act of violence can liberate us from: a violence Hazel will avoid if at all possible, because, simply put, freedom hurts. It’s a police officer that ultimately shatters the illusion that Hazel has constructed around the Essex, forcing him into the freedom O’Connor associates with the Christian faith.

Disregarding the attendant’s advice, Hazel begins his journey to a new city, but before he can make it past all the familiar landmarks, a highway patrol officer pulls him over. The fate that has been pursuing Hazel throughout the novel now catches up to him. Hazel and the officer exchange impertinent remarks before the officer directs Hazel to follow him to a nearby hill, claiming that he has something he’d like to show him. Hazel follows the patrol car to the hilltop, preparing himself for a fist fight, but the patrolman simply asks him to have a look out over the ridge.

Haze got out and glanced at the view. The embankment dropped down for about thirty feet, sheer washed-out red clay, into a partly burnt pasture where there was one scrub cow lying near a puddle. Over in the middle distance was a one-room shack with a buzzard standing hunch shouldered on the roof. (208-09)

Hazel sees nothing remarkable about the landscape; the view contains a few mundane objects, none of which captures his interest. However, after distracting Hazel with his request, the police officer pushes the Essex over the edge and the car tumbles to pieces.

Gazing down at the destroyed automobile, the narrative indicates a remarkable change in Hazel's perception of the empty landscape. Its destruction signifies his fragility and finitude in contrast with the sublime immensity of the sky:

Haze stood for a few minutes, looking over at the scene. His face seemed to reflect the entire distance across the clearing and beyond, the entire distance that extended from his eyes to the blank gray sky that went on, depth after depth, into space. His knees bent under him and he sat down on the edge of the embankment with his feet hanging over. (209)

At Hazel's first encounter with Asa Hawks, Asa prophecies this moment: "you have eyes and see not, ear and hear not, but you'll have to see some time" (54). Now, for the first time, Hazel finally registers the boundless natural world, including its spiritual extensions, that had up until this point been obstructed by the edifices of Taulkinham. Like Paul on the road to Damascus, Hazel is devastated by what seems to be a tragedy, but this devastating experience allows him a glimpse of the sacramental world for the first time.

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Hazel's vision paradoxically inspires him to blind himself, which signifies a radical re-orientation with the sacramental world and the Christian faith. Hazel's blinding is not only an act of self-immolation for having murdered Solace Layfield, but it is also partially inspired by Asa's aforementioned attempt to blind himself as an effort "to justify his belief that Jesus Christ had redeemed him" (112). Just prior to Hazel's discovery of Asa's past, Hazel challenges Christianity's effectiveness by suggesting that Jesus is incapable of curing Asa's blindness: "If Jesus cured blind men, how come you

don't get Him to cure you?" he asks Asa (108). The irony of course is that Asa isn't blind, but he responds by informing Hazel that "He blinded Paul" (108).

Paul becomes a central figure in the novel through the trope of sight and its connection with salvation. Even Hazel's name suggests that vision is the novel's primary trope. In her Yale Open Course lectures on the "American Novel since 1945," Amy Hungerford suggests that Motes, or mote, seems to be an allusion to the language of Matthew 7:5: "Thou hypocrite. First cast out the beam of thine own eye and then you will see clearly to cast the *mote* out of thy brother's eye." In this verse, believers are warned to be wary of their own shortcomings before condemning others for less significant faults through metaphorical imagery of occluded vision. Hazel's first name is an extension of this same trope as he is often diminutively referred to as Haze, enhancing the suggestion of occluded vision. Paul, Hazel's biblical analogue, also persecutes Christians before a light blinds him on the road to Damascus, an event that inspires his own conversion (Acts 9:1-8). Paul's loss of sight is accompanied by a revelation; a combination that allows him to see beyond the material world and into the mystery of Christ. O'Connor derives her visual motifs and narrative structure from one of the greatest conversions in the biblical tradition. O'Connor uses the archetypal connection with Paul and the brief exchange with Asa to prepare Hazel, as well as her audience, to understand that his blinding is a symbolic gesture that signifies penance, the end of his apostasy, and subsequent return to the Christianity.

Following his self-immolation, Hazel retires from his ministry and adopts the quiet life of an ascetic. In almost every way imaginable, Hazel extricates himself from day-to-day life in order to focus on his spiritual quest. His withdrawal is so complete that

he becomes a ghoulish, almost spectral figure; Mrs. Flood describes his company as akin to “sitting by yourself” (213) and “being courted by a corpse” (217). But the withdrawal isn’t just social; Hazel’s pursuit of the truth in the Christian faith is so one-dimensional that he becomes a grotesque figure. In the first chapter of *Winesburg, Ohio* titled “The Book of the Grotesque,” Sherwood Anderson provides a definition of the grotesque as well intentioned, but blinded by its singularity: “It was the truths that made the people grotesque. [...] the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood” (3). Similarly, Mrs. Flood believes the Christian truth reduces the complexity of Hazel’s life to singular purpose, producing something inhuman in its wake: “he could have been dead and get all he got out of life but the exercise. He might as well be one of them monks, she thought, he might as well be in a monkery” (218). While Mrs. Flood’s malapropism has a comic effect, her association of Hazel with the cloistered life of a monk is accurate (not to mention the one-dimensional aspect of total religious dedication reducing its practitioners to something less than human—a monkey). Like the monks who are said to sleep in their coffins to remind themselves of their singular, spiritual purpose, Hazel also maintains such a close contact with death that he becomes quite oblivious to life. His pursuit of the Christian faith appears to be a reversal of his childhood fear of death; Hazel now embraces a drive towards death in order to reconcile himself with the infinite, rejecting the basic instincts normally associated with Eros. The medieval forms of penance that he practices—walking on gravel and glass (222) or wrapping a barbed wire cilice around his chest (224)—“are certainly acts of assertion even though they are instinctive. When he says he does it to pay, he means to pay his

part of the debt of Redemption,” says O’Connor (CW 921). But not only are these forms of penance ways for Hazel to expiate his sin, they also produce manageable portions of pain and suffering that help him prepare for his own death and transformation.

In the novel’s conclusion, two police officers find Hazel barely conscious at a construction site. According to Richard Giannone, the construction site signifies Hazel’s ascent out of the geographical, psychological, and spiritual ditches and valleys that mar O’Connor’s fictional landscapes. Giannone believes the violent male protagonists found in her most popular works are generally seekers that must descend into the dark night of the soul and, after enduring trials and tribulations, then and only then begin their ascent to God. In *Wise Blood*, the abandoned construction site not only has the dynamic connection that Giannone makes in regard to the descent and ascent in the spiritual journey, but it also signifies the proximity of the spiritual world to the material. If we return once more to “The Peeler” chapter, O’Connor describes the vast celestial construction project as it is outshone by the commercial district of downtown Taulkinham—the celestial site is distant and unnoticed—but in the final chapter, the spiritual construction site has become manifest. The ditch’s proximity to the construction site suggests that Hazel has made progress in his spiritual journey, but he isn’t said to have arrived home until after his death, indicating that Hazel’s fundamental displacement on earth has been resolved in death.⁷

⁷ When the police officers carry Hazel’s body inside her house, she ironically exclaims, “I see you’ve come home!” indicating his spiritual salvation as well as his return to her household (231).

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The narrative thus far develops a set of symbols and tropes that appear to support a resolution that indicates Hazel's conversion in rather unambiguous terms, but if we reexamine his life as a Christian from an alternate perspective, the nature of his conversion seems less certain. The final chapter's narrative shift from Hazel as a privileged subject to Mrs. Flood, a tertiary character, provides us with a secular perspective which casts some doubt on the nature of Hazel's conversion. O'Connor, however, utilizes the shift in perspective to avoid an uncharacteristic *deus ex machina* resolution. The shift primarily allows O'Connor to construct a Christian narrative without actually treating Christianity directly. She uses this method of negation quite often throughout her body of work. For instance, she rarely portrays Catholic figures due to the problems that would arise from a direct and affirmative depiction of her faith, so instead she implies it in contrast to secular and Protestant modes of belief. As a satirist, it's easy for her to show how secular modernity and Protestantism, which avow superiority due to their liberal humanist traditions, often produce irrational individuals, such as the representative characters in the novel, but it's difficult for her to sustain a positive image of her own faith. A sustained depiction of the Christian life would run the risk of idealization and sentimentality, so, more often than not, the characters that undergo a spiritual transformation will die soon afterward. In *Wise Blood*, the final chapter's shift in perspective allows O'Connor to circumvent a direct depiction of Christian redemption as experienced by the believer, in order to avoid potential criticism for its idealistic representation. The shift creates a subjective distancing that defers any

accusations of sentimentality and idealized images away from its author and onto the mawkish ignorance of Mrs. Flood.

Mrs. Flood interprets Hazel's ascetic life as a Christian in all sorts of comic ways. The notion of blinding strikes her as peculiarly morbid: "if she felt bad, she would have killed herself [...] She would have simply put her head in an oven or maybe have given herself too many painless sleeping pills and that would have been that" (211). The idea of living for anything other than the pursuit of comfort and pleasure is totally foreign to her, but it seems all the more eccentric, since Hazel's everyday existence is now circumscribed by his physical affliction. The prospect of living with such a serious affliction and not taking advantage of what little enjoyment life still has to offer strikes Mrs. Flood as unnatural: "If she had been blind, she would have sat by the radio all day, eating cake and ice cream, and soaking her feet" (211). Hazel, however, allows himself no indulgences; he either sits quietly with that "peculiar pushing look, as if it were going forward after something it could just distinguish in the distance" or walks about the neighborhood (214). But even with pursuits of pleasure aside, she cannot understand what makes his life worth living. Since Hazel's goals seem so alien and out of sync with modern life, they inspire Mrs. Flood to imagine what his life must be like, but her experiences as an able-bodied person prevent her from accurately imagining a non-visual world: "she had to imagine [a] pin point of light," she needs something that she can fix her eyes on even when the world has gone black. She can't help but to associate this pin point of light with cartoonish representations of the wise men following the star of Bethlehem: "She saw it as some kind of a star, like the star on a Christmas card. She saw him going backwards to Bethlehem and she had to laugh" (219). While Mrs. Flood's

interpretations of Hazel's spiritual quest are often comedic and provide us with moments of levity in an otherwise serious narrative about salvation, we shouldn't dismiss them as nonsense for their lack of spiritual comprehension. She is, after all, his primary caregiver during his final days and one of the only people to witness the redeemed portion of his life; she raises some serious questions regarding Hazel's supposed Christian life.

From Mrs. Flood's point of view, Hazel suffers from something similar to listlessness and despair, which results in medieval forms of self-abuse, apathy, and ultimately withdrawal from society and human affection. She tries to encourage him to develop a hobby so that he can shake himself free of his ennui: "She thought it would be a good thing if he had something to do with his hands, something to bring him out of himself and get him in connection with the real world again" (219). At first she suggests that he learn to play the guitar, but nothing comes of it. Later she urges him to pursue his ministry again, "I expect you're a fine preacher! You certainly ought to start it again. It would give you something to do. As it is, you don't have anything to do but walk. Why don't you start preaching again?" (221). In some respects, Mrs. Flood doesn't mind that Hazel languishes around the house; it simply allows her greater access to Hazel's monthly pension, since he isn't spending it elsewhere, but she's quite alarmed by his continued mortification of the flesh.

Not only does Hazel revive the practice of walking on glass and stones, which he had abandoned in his youth, but he also begins to cinch his chest with a barbed wire cilice. One morning Mrs. Flood is startled to discover him fast asleep while wearing his barbed wire cilice and inquires, "what do you do these things for? It's not natural. [...]" It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing—like boiling

in oil or being a saint or walling up cats” (224). Mrs. Flood believes Hazel’s mortification of the flesh, in Freudian terms, is an imbalanced death drive that results in an pathological resignation of life. Once again Mrs. Flood reprimands Hazel for his listlessness, but this time she adds that his strange behavior must be associated with Jesus: “It’s easier to bleed than sweat, Mr. Motes [...] You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn’t do these foolish things” (225).

The final point Mrs. Flood makes about the perversity of Hazel’s conversion is that it has eradicated the joy and love from his life. She barely articulates these thoughts, but her efforts to bring joy to his life and offer him her companionship are so forcefully spurned that Hazel demonstrates them plainly enough. Mrs. Flood tries to make him appreciate the fact that she cares for him and that “few men are as fortunate as [he is]” (226). However, she complains, “I can’t keep climbing these stairs [to care for him]. It wears me out” (226). As a solution, she suggests they get married, so that they can share a room on the first floor, which would substantially reduce her work. The solution, however, is followed by an ultimatum: “I can’t allow you to stay here under no other circumstances” (227-28). While Mrs. Flood had been plotting to coax Hazel into marriage for quite some time, as indicated much earlier in the chapter (219), it’s difficult to say that her intentions are insincere. After Hazel rejects her offer, Mrs. Flood breaks down at the thought of her friend suffering without anyone to look after him:

That night a driving icy rain came up and lying in her bed, awake at midnight, Mrs. Flood, the landlady, began to weep. She wanted to run out into the rain and cold and hunt him and find him huddled in some half-sheltered place and bring him back and say, Mr. Motes, Mr. Motes, you

can stay here forever, or the two of us will go where you're going, the two of us will go. (229)

As spurious as her motives have been up until this point, Mrs. Flood's midnight confession is one of the only genuine moments of human compassion in the novel, and while it may be too little, too late, Hazel has spurned all of her efforts to bring more joy and human contact into his life. Whether it was encouraging him to take up his ministry and commune with others or something as simple as enjoying a nice meal, he has continually rejected her in order to withdraw deeper and deeper into himself where he is supposed to find the truth of the Christian faith.

As I mentioned earlier, St. Paul is Hazel's archetypal predecessor and the inspiration for many of the motifs explored throughout the novel. If we re-examine Paul's connection with Hazel, Mrs. Flood's observations can even be validated by Christian standards. By constructing a rudimentary outline of Paul's life, certain aspects will complement Hazel's, but even more striking will be the differences in their post-conversion life. Paul, prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, seeks to repress the early Christian movement. While on his way to Damascus to arrest a group of Christian leaders, a flash of light blinds him and the voice of Jesus reprimands him for persecuting his followers. The Lord directs Paul into Damascus where He cures his blindness and instructs him to "take My message everywhere, telling what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:15). In the remaining years of his life, Paul commits himself to spreading the gospel and establishing the foundations of the Church. Despite many tribulations, including beatings, shipwrecks, and plots against his life, Paul remains joyous in his affairs. "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Mark 12:31), according to Paul, is

the greatest commandment and the fulfillment of the Judeo-Christian law.⁸ His life after his conversion is a model of charity and love that continually seeks communion with others.

Hazel, like Paul, had been a persecutor of Christians. He badgers them on trains, bickers with them in the streets, and murders one in the countryside. And, of course, many aspects regarding his conversion bear similarity with Paul, particularly the motif of occluded. Hazel's conversion, however, doesn't seem to produce the same elation or love that Paul's had. Hazel's lack of love and drive towards death complicate O'Connor's depiction of the Christian faith as an answer to the issues of secular modernity. If Hazel's pursuit of the truth has led him to salvation in Christ, the love and joy that Paul proclaims are the natural consequence of the truth are conspicuously absent.⁹ When Paul writes, "If I gave everything I have to poor people, and if I were burned alive for preaching the Gospel but didn't love others, it would be of no value whatever" (1 Cor. 13:3), it's difficult not to associate Hazel with this passage. His life as an ascetic resonates with the images of material renunciation, self-sacrifice, and mortification, but as Paul implies, if this great gesture isn't informed by love and in aid of the Church's mission of witness, it's simply a vanity.

⁸ "The [Ten] commandments, [...] are wrapped up in this one, to love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to anyone. That's why it fully satisfies all of God's requirements. It is the only law you need." (The Catholic Living Bible) 13:9-10

⁹ "[Love] is never glad about injustice, but rejoices whenever truth wins out" (1 Cor. 13:6).

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O'Connor wants her audience to understand Hazel's pathological tendencies, not as the ideal Christian life, but as a vastly improved life for someone fostered by Protestant fundamentalism and consumer culture. Hazel doesn't live in a Catholic world where he can acclimate himself to the Christian life in accordance with the models set forth by the Catholic Church and its saints. According to O'Connor, "he is the ultimate Protestant" (921); he both lives in and is the product of a Protestant world ruptured by a burgeoning culture of amoral consumerism. She says, "I have directed the irony [of *Wise Blood*] against this Protestant world or against the society that reads the Bible and the Sears Roebuck catalogue wrong," and the faults found in their beliefs and aspirations will also be found in its modes of salvation (921). While O'Connor will concede that the Protestant faith is vastly superior to secular modes of living, it suffers, in her opinion, due to its break with the Catholic Church: "To my mind, [the Protestant faith] is right, you just arn't [sic] right enough" (921). While Protestants maintain some of the basic Catholic tenets that suffice to provide them with salvation, their doctrines, according to O'Connor, produce "a do-it-yourself" mentality "that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments." (HB 350).

However, O'Connor claims that her intended audience isn't Protestant or even Catholic readers, who often feel scandalized by her grotesque depictions of redemption and salvation, but rather a secular audience that needs a prophetic voice: "My audience are the people who think God is dead," she says, "At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (HB 92). When writers produce literature for an audience that believes as they do, O'Connor says, "you can relax a little and use more normal means of

talking to it,” but “when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you have to shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (MM 34). She wants her audience to recognize the problems of modernity as primarily spiritual problems that require a spiritual solution.

O’Connor believes that the grotesque, as an aesthetic, will not only provide the startling images that will capture her audience’s attention, but will also provide them with an understanding of the Christian tradition. We should not forget that O’Connor is very much a part of the post-war world. She deeply feels that humanity, and by its course, the entirety of the physical world has fallen from grace and now only has a partial connection with the divine. Not only did she see technological progress aid in the destruction of millions of lives during the Second World War, but she was also subject to its terrible aftermath—the looming fear of a nuclear apocalypse. O’Connor doesn’t simply rationalize these atrocities as an unfortunate product of a complex political climate compounded by national anxiety; rather, according to Frederick Crews, O’Connor believes that the “recent cataclysms are just what [the world] deserves [...] for having taken up with the Enlightenment’s fatal substitution of reason for revelation” (157). The atrocities of twentieth century seem to confirm her belief that any attempt by an atheist or non-believer to express charity, kindness, or tenderness will ultimately fail: “When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness [i.e. God], its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber” (MM 227). Through grotesque literature, O’Connor depicts images of the world’s suffering as an opportunity to reestablish a connection with the spiritual world. It’s from within these

images of violence and terror that O'Connor hopes to show her audience that even at its ugliest and most degraded moments, it has the possibility for reconciliation with God.

As a writer who seeks to bear witness to a secular audience, O'Connor identifies a particularly prophetic quality in the grotesque that will not only help them make sense of the horrors of the world, but will also allow them a new understanding of mystery and grace. John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century critic and essayist, also believes that the artist who witnesses degradation and suffering in the world will have a tendency to produce wild and occasionally violent forms of grotesque literature. However, the true grotesque artist is able to access a sublime truth through these wild forms, which would have otherwise been inaccessible: "It is because the dreadfulness of the universe around him weighs upon his heart, that his work is wild; and therefore through the whole of it we shall find the evidence of deep insight into nature. His beasts and birds, however monstrous, will have profound relations with the true" (cited in Clayborough 14). Ruskin's description of the true grotesque artists resonates with O'Connor's ambitions to utilize the freakishness of her characters so that her audience may discover a spiritual truth that could not otherwise be accessed through conventional methods of mimesis.

Anthony Di Renzo, author of *American Gargoyles: Flannery O'Connor and the Medieval Grotesque*, compares O'Connor's fiction with the grotesque paintings of Pieter Bruegel. Di Renzo suggests that both artists utilize the grotesque genre to degrade Christian ideals in order to make them serviceable to the common man once again. The artist, according to Di Renzo, "affirms what is happening [in grotesque works of art] even as he condemns it" (19). When Bruegel depicts episodes from Christ's nativity and

passion in medieval Flanders, he impertinently contradicts the classical school of art by rejecting its dramatic and idealized conventions. He depicts the quotidian Flemish experience with as much detail as he depicts the grandest moments of Christ's life. Bruegel contrasts biblical narratives against caricatured backdrops that seek to encapsulate the totality of medieval village life and these scenes are so excruciatingly detailed that the key figures become lost in a sea of humanity. Bruegel's work, like O'Connor's, exuberantly affirms blasphemy and the degradation of Christian ideals even as he condemns them; the works themselves bear similarity to the Feast of Fools taking place in the midst of Lent—a celebration of human folly and excess rupturing into the ascetic observance of humanity's need for redemption.

Marshall Bruce Gentry, author of *Flannery O'Connor's Religion of the Grotesque*, develops even further the idea of contradictory impulses in the grotesque tradition:

The grotesque degrades the ideal, but, as I have said, the ideal that is grotesquely degraded is not obliterated: the grotesque retains traces of the ideal. The retained connection between the ideal and the grotesque indicates that one "destination" of the grotesque is a reformation of the ideal. The process does not end there, however, for when the grotesque re-establishes an ideal, the ideal must again be desecrated. (17)

The grotesque, as a genre, allows the artist to deconstruct an ideal—to momentarily negate it—in order to dialectically refine and sublimate it. We can see this dialectic progression in O'Connor's grotesque depiction of Hazel's final days as a Christian. If we look at the initial stages of Hazel's life, the earliest phase consists of a fundamentalist

indoctrination by his family, which instills in him a fear of sin, death, and Christ. Hazel's experiences during the war and his encounter with secular society allow him to casually engage in sin without fearing his own death or the monstrous Christ figure believed to induce it, but this new freedom requires him to dismantle and reconstruct his understanding of the world. The initial negation of the Christian conception of the world results in the need for a new truth, which he initially associates with consumerism. This brief overview already illustrates the initial term—a distorted understanding of the Christian faith—and its negation by consumer culture and existentialism. In the final phase, Hazel's worldly faith is also negated by the destruction of the Essex. This secondary negation returns Hazel to Christianity, which O'Connor believes is the ultimate truth. At the time of Hazel's death, he is still isolated and loveless, but if he had not died, these issues might also have been resolved through continued cycles of desecration and reformation.

In O'Connor's grotesquely distorted and often diabolic images, the Christian ideal can always be found lurking somewhere close by. Her images of abnormality and freakishness have a reflexive quality that forces audiences to contemplate their lives, much in the same way that Hazel's abnormal behavior implores Mrs. Flood to reflect upon her own life. The artist, who depicts "a freak for his hero, is not simply showing us what we are, but what we have been and what we could become" (MM 117-118). The grotesque has the prophetic ability to show society what it has lost in its social and technological progress, but also provides a moment of reflection that can inspire individuals to recover portions of their past as well as producing visions of a better life that we can aspire to achieve. As a race of maimed souls, O'Connor's grotesques and

freaks bare their spiritual deficiencies in order to provide us with “some conception of the whole man” as conceived by her theology (44).

Conclusion

In the last chapter, I highlighted two plausible explanations for Hazel's less than ideal circumstances at the end of the novel. The first justification stressed O'Connor's claim that Hazel, as "a kind of Protestant saint," cannot overcome worldly adversity because he doesn't have the guidance of Catholic doctrine and community to supplement his redemption (CW 921). The second reason for his wretched conclusion suggests that O'Connor's use of the grotesque functions not only to attract the attention of audiences numbed to traditional religious rhetoric, but that her literary form imitates the dialectical process at the heart of novel's spiritual quest. Thus far, I've provided a generally sympathetic reading of O'Connor's promotion of Christianity as a means of resisting consumer culture, but, in order to maintain the dialectical model that I've been working with, it's important to establish the limitations of O'Connor's religious vision. For secular readers who don't already concur with O'Connor's theological assertions—an audience she claims to appeal to—my attempts to justify O'Connor's grotesque form in terms of her Christian faith will probably fail to resolve the ambiguities in *Wise Blood's* conclusion.

For many readers, Hazel's repulsive self-immolation, as well as the narrative's treatment of the minor characters, suggests that O'Connor privileges her literary form over her intention to write religiously themed fiction. John Hawkes, like many other critics, cautions readers that O'Connor's narrative style is all too committed to "the devil's voice as a vehicle for [her] satire" for us take the religious assertions of her fiction seriously (396). By "the devil's voice," Hawkes, I believe, refers to O'Connor's

tendency to reduce subjects to mechanical objects or animals, while at the same time, elevating inhuman objects or creatures to humans. There are any number of good examples of this maneuver, so I will provide a few germane passages: “[Hazel] stood there for an instant, small in the middle of the steps, and then he raised his arm and hurled the stack of tracts he had been carrying. It hit Enoch in the chest and knocked his mouth open” (59); or “Sometimes [Enoch] didn’t think, he only wondered; then before long he would find himself doing this or that, like a bird finds itself building a nest” (129). Or in the case of inanimate objects being elevated to humanity, we get descriptions of trees that appear to wear “ankle-socks” (96) or bears that look “like two matrons having tea” (93). This reductive maneuver would probably be acceptable if O’Connor’s only goal were to satirize humanity’s belief in its own rational powers, but since O’Connor also wants to illustrate humanity’s need for redemption, the reductive tendency becomes fraught with contradictory meanings. Hawkes finds it difficult to take O’Connor’s Christian claims at face value, because the narration often fails to value characters as souls worthy of salvation. With “demolishing syntax,” her narrators “reflect the verbal mannerisms and explosively reductive attitudes of such figures [various demonic representation in O’Connor’s works] in their own ‘black’ authorial stances” (400). The demolishing syntax of *Wise Blood*’s narrative tends to put little value on individuals as souls worthy of love and compassion, let alone salvation—a linguistic act that Martha Stephens believes stems out of a diabolic contempt for humanity:

[In *Wise Blood*] human faces remind [O’Connor] of rodents, cats, dogs, mandrills, and vegetables; they are frog-like, hawk-like, gap-toothed, mildewed, shale-textured, red-skinned, stupid, demented, and simply

“evil.” Each part of the physiognomy comes in for its share of abuse; hair is likened to dirty mops and rings of sausage—it is said to stream down the face like ham gravy. One could continue the catalog—but the point, I think, is clear. Human beings are ugly in every way; the human form itself is distinctly unpleasant to behold; human life is a sordid, almost unrelievedly hideous affair. (cited in Di Renzo 3)

The overwhelming number of these cruel depictions in *Wise Blood* alone gives credence to Hawkes’ claim that O’Connor commits “herself creatively to the antics of soulless characters who leer, or bicker, or stare at obscenities on walls, or maim each other on a brilliant but barren earth” (398), and that she is less a Christian prophet than a satirical nihilist.

While I cited Ruskin’s earlier passage to indicate that O’Connor’s writing in some ways exemplifies an artist’s effort to transcend the wretchedness of the material world, what we’ve seen of her grotesque distortions in the passages above would suggest that O’Connor finds very little transcendent value in the characters of her fiction. According to Ruskin:

[The true grotesque artist] may be an ignorant man, and little acquainted with the laws of nature; [...] but he never saw a serpent cross his path, nor a bird flit across the sky, nor a lizard bask upon a stone, without learning so much of the sublimity and inner nature of each as will not suffer him henceforth to conceive them coldly. (cited in Clayborough 14)

O’Connor, however, seems to be unaware that a vast majority of her characters need love and compassion, to say nothing of salvation. In “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,”

O'Connor declares that the association between the grotesque and compassion would make it extremely difficult for her "to be anti-anything"; compassion, she believes, will undermine her moral authority (43). She does have a point when she says writers must sometimes use abhorrent and unsympathetic characters as emblematic figures of evil in order to be didactic, but O'Connor's fiction is quite extreme in that it is difficult to find any sympathetic characters whatsoever. According to Ruskin, this lack of sympathy is indicative of the ignoble grotesque artist who "mocks at all things with the laughter of the idiot and the cretin," as opposed to the true artist who seeks the sublime lurking behind monstrous figures (cited in Clayborough 13). O'Connor mercilessly depicts many of the characters that populate her fiction with such indifference or diabolic reductiveness that her religious claims are jeopardized by her brand of grotesque humor.

Wise Blood has a tendency to baffle first-time readers, especially if they don't have an extensive knowledge of Christian theology, and many of them, according to Hawkes, tend to "mistake Flannery O'Connor's belief in the Holy for its opposite"—atheistic nihilism (398). O'Connor even acknowledges this problem in a 1954 letter to Ben Griffith: "Not too many people are willing to see [that the book was written in the Christian spirit], and perhaps it is hard to see because H. Motes is such an admirable nihilist" (HB 70). In this passage, she seems to confuse her readers' willingness with their (in)ability to distinguish her intentions as an author and reasonably so. It's difficult for many readers, whether Christian or otherwise, to recognize the Christian spirit of the novel, because not only is Hazel's conclusion somewhat ambiguous, but the narrative voice is decidedly unChristian in tone. The audience is hard-pressed to find the gratuitous acts of love and sacrifice, which characterize the New Testament, within the

novel itself; these basic Christian tenets lurk somewhere off stage, tucked safely away in O'Connor's supplemental prose.

O'Connor offers us Christianity as the only holistic solution to modern life that can insulate vulnerable individuals from the schizophrenic trends and fluctuation of consumerism. Often, in explicating her own texts, she risks sounding a bit triumphalist in her quixotic depictions of Christianity and its ability to resist consumerism. However, she does remind her audience that explication lies outside her field of expertise—"I am a novelist not a critic and I can excuse myself from explication de textes [sic] on that ground" (HB 70)—a statement that demonstrates at least a partial awareness of her own biases. Just as secular humanism subverted the Christian orthodoxy of the middle ages, O'Connor wants to subvert the new, secular orthodoxy she sees settling into post-war America by reasserting society's need for religion and a sense of mystery. This, I think, is commendable, but in order to avoid a mere pendulum model of national moods, we have to look for qualities in both O'Connor's fiction and Christianity that actually help elevate our lives.

As I've suggested, if readers don't already believe O'Connor's religious claims, it becomes difficult to see just how and where Christianity improves the lives of her characters, and this is why John Hawkes is so important to O'Connor studies. Hawkes, according to Frederick Crews, "performed a valuable function in returning O'Connor criticism to earth—in preventing all the talk of grace from obscuring the actual antics" of her fiction (156). That is to say, if we accept the religious claims in O'Connor's prose unquestioningly, we will subordinate the ugliness and cruelty of her fiction to her theology. An example of how the subordination of her literary product to the theology

that informs it can produce a callousness or indifference towards the world is in O'Connor's story "The Artificial Nigger." O'Connor writes, "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). The use of the "sambo" statue to symbolize human suffering may be a provocative and powerful image, but to transform the very real pain and suffering experienced by an oppressed minority into a symbol of universal pain and suffering is not only racially insensitive, but it also tacitly justifies this pain and suffering in a shameful theodicy that most readers cannot accept. Another example of O'Connor's callousness toward human suffering revolves around the issue of the Catholic Church and its stance toward contraceptives. She writes:

The Church's stand on birth control is the most absolutely spiritual of all her stands and with all of us being materialists at heart, there is little wonder that it causes unease. I wish various fathers would quit trying to defend it by saying that the world can support 40 billion. I will rejoice in the day when they say: This is right, whether we all rot on top of each other or not, dear children, as we certainly may. Either practice restraint or be prepared for crowding... (HB 338)

O'Connor's grotesque image of the world in total adherence to the tenets of the Catholic Church, producing a hellish vision of rotting masses of humanity stacked atop one another, seems more like one of Goya's etchings than even O'Connor would like to admit. This last statement, supported by her Catholic theology, bears a tremendous amount of acceptance of human suffering.

Against the optimism of consumeristic progressivism in post-war America, O'Connor depicts a much bleaker image of the intractable pain of human existence as ultimately irredeemable by human efforts. The suggestion in *Wise Blood* and almost all her fiction that Christianity, as a spiritual and social institution, can provide the only available succor for human suffering is a bit suspect and too passive for a good portion of her audience who would like to see tangible results. However, the novel does provide readers with a powerful, yet grim, critique of materialism and consumer culture that exposes the emptiness and nihilism in the American way of life. Her fiction asks us to reconsider the state of our current social order and our collective vision of what it may become. In *Wise Blood*, we see the secular orthodoxy of the post-war era broadened by the spiritual horizon of her faith as it looks beyond American materialism and consumerism, while at the same time it limits her own vision of society's potential to create a more just and harmonious social order. While O'Connor may overdo or undersell her representation of Christianity, depending on one's perspective, the abiding virtue of her fiction is that it startles us. Crews believes that the novelty of O'Connor's fiction has dissipated and is no longer capable of startling audiences: "the violence of action and freakishness of portraiture that troubled many of [O'Connor's] earliest readers scarcely raise an eyebrow today" (145). But unless the Millennials have developed their capacity for empathy in ways that far surpasses those of Generation X (*The Critics Bear It Away* was published in 1992), then I strongly disagree. We can safely say that audiences have certain expectations for artistic genres, so where morbidity may not shock a youth acclimated to the conventions of horror movies or violent video games, readers are nearly always shocked by the violence and sordidness in the expressly Catholic

fiction of a Southern woman writing in the 1950's. Even if the morbid imagery of O'Connor's fiction is the result, as Hawkes would say, of a demonic or debased impulse, it forces us to take seriously the despair of modern life that produces these images and how they might be addressed more effectively.

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