

*Modern Critical Views*

# FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Edited and with an Introduction by  
**HAROLD BLOOM**



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## Editor's Note

This book brings together the best criticism available upon the stories and novels of Flannery O'Connor, arranged in the chronological order of its publication. I am grateful to David Parker for his aid in researching this volume.

The introduction centers upon *The Violent Bear It Away*, and two stories, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and "A View of the Woods," in order to explore what many readers have found to be a division between O'Connor's stance as a Catholic moralist, and the extraordinary thematic and narrative violence of her characteristic work. John Hawkes, distinguished novelist and friend of O'Connor, shrewdly links her to Nathanael West's parallel preoccupation with violence and the sacred, in an essay that begins the chronological sequence of criticism here. In the first of his two appearances in this book, the late Robert Fitzgerald, admirable poet and close friend of O'Connor, gives an exemplary reading to the story "The Displaced Person," which is followed by his poignant and illuminating introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

An analysis of O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, by Lewis A. Lawson concludes that her peculiar mode of the grotesque resulted from her conviction that a world which had abandoned normative religion could only be represented without norms, as wholly fallen into the grotesque. Joyce Carol Oates, herself a visionary storyteller of singular power and persuasiveness, describes O'Connor's visionary art as a pure kind of revelation, archaic and sublime, impatient of the codification of apocalyptic religious experience into dogma.

In a reading of O'Connor's first and last stories, Ralph C. Wood convincingly affirms that the spiritual and aesthetic distance traversed between "The Geranium" and "Judgement Day" is a matter not of decades but of light years. Carol Shloss, analyzing several major stories, concludes that they are epiphanies, deliberately leaving nothing to inference. Confirmation of this argument is offered by Ronald Schleifer's more secular contention that the supernatural interventions crowding O'Connor's "rural Gothic" allow the author to transcend the more inadequate tropes to which her rhetoric sometimes submits. Another kind

of confirmation is presented in the exegesis of the Double motif in O'Connor by Frederick Asals, which discovers transcendent aspects that mitigate the obsessiveness of this recurrent element in her work.

Two powerful advanced critiques of O'Connor end this volume, with each highly aware of the Gnostic auras so strangely present in her work, and each deeply informed by current developments in literary criticism. Jefferson Humphries relates O'Connor both to Proust and to the aesthetic of violence, each pervaded by Gnostic images, while John Burt analyzes *Wise Blood* and the great, somber story "Parker's Back" as instances of her most authentic spiritual vision, with Gnostic and even Calvinist overtones. Both Humphries and Burt carry us full circle back to the editor's introduction, with its meditation upon what may be incongruous in O'Connor's theology in regard to her actual narrative art.

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## *Introduction*

### I

A professedly Roman Catholic prose romance begins with the death of an eighty-four-year-old Southern American Protestant, self-called prophet, and professional moonshiner, as set forth in this splendidly comprehensive sentence:

Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle had been dead for only half a day when the boy got too drunk to finish digging his grave and a Negro named Buford Munson, who had come to get a jug filled, had to finish it and drag the body from the breakfast table where it was still sitting and bury it in a decent and Christian way, with the sign of its Saviour at the head of the grave and enough dirt on top to keep the dogs from digging it up.

Flannery O'Connor's masterwork, *The Violent Bear It Away*, ends with the fourteen-year-old Tarwater marching towards the city of destruction, where his own career as prophet is to be suffered:

Intermittently the boy's jagged shadow slanted across the road ahead of him as if it cleared a rough path toward his goal. His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.

In Flannery O'Connor's fierce vision, the children of God, all of us, always are asleep in the outward life. Young Tarwater, clearly O'Connor's surrogate, is in clinical terms a borderline schizophrenic, subject to auditory hallucinations in which he hears the advice of an imaginary friend who is overtly the Christian Devil. But clinical terms are utterly alien to O'Connor, who accepts only theological namings and unnamings. This is necessarily a spiritual strength in



O'Connor, yet it can be an aesthetic distraction also, since *The Violent Bear It Away* is a fiction of preternatural power, and not a religious tract. Rayber, the antagonist of both prophets, old and young Tarwater, is an aesthetic disaster, whose defects in representation alone keep the book from making a strong third with Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* and Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. O'Connor despises Rayber, and cannot bother to make him even minimally persuasive. We wince at his unlikely verbal mixture of popular sociology and confused psychology, as even Sally Fitzgerald, O'Connor's partisan, is compelled to admit:

Her weaknesses—a lack of perfect familiarity with the terminology of the secular sociologists, psychologists, and rationalists she often casts as adversary figures, and an evident weighting of the scales against them all—are present in the character of Rayber (who combines all three categories).

One hardly believes that a perfect familiarity with the writings say of David Riesman, Erik Erikson, and Karl Popper would have enabled O'Connor to make poor Rayber a more plausible caricature of what she despised. We remember *The Violent Bear It Away* for its two prophets, and particularly young Tarwater, who might be called a Gnostic version of Huckleberry Finn. What makes us free is the Gnosis, according to the most ancient of heresies. O'Connor, who insisted upon her Catholic orthodoxy, necessarily believed that what makes us free is baptism in Christ, and for her the title of her novel was its most important aspect, since the words are spoken by Jesus himself:

But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet.

For this is *he*, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.

Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force.

I have quoted the King James Version of Matt. 11:9–12, where “and the violent take it by force” is a touch more revealing than O'Connor's Catholic version, “and the violent bear it away.” For O'Connor, we are back in or rather never have left Christ's time of urgency, and her heart is with those like the Tarwaters who know that the kingdom of heaven will suffer them to take it by force:

The lack of realism would be crucial if this were a realistic novel or if the novel demanded the kind of realism you demand. I don't believe

it does. The old man is very obviously not a Southern Baptist, but an independent, a prophet in the true sense. The true prophet is inspired by the Holy Ghost, not necessarily by the dominant religion of his region. Further, the traditional Protestant bodies of the South are evaporating into secularism and respectability and are being replaced on the grass roots level by all sorts of strange sects that bear not much resemblance to traditional Protestantism—Jehovah's Witnesses, snake-handlers, Free Thinking Christians, Independent Prophets, the swindlers, the mad, and sometimes the genuinely inspired. A character has to be true to his own nature and I think the old man is that. He was a prophet, not a church-member. As a prophet, he has to be a natural Catholic. Hawthorne said he didn't write novels, he wrote romances; I am one of his descendants.

O'Connor's only disputable remark in this splendid defense of her book is the naming of old Tarwater as "a natural Catholic." Hawthorne's descendant she certainly was, by way of Faulkner, T. S. Eliot, and Nathanael West, but though Hawthorne would have approved her mode, he would have been shocked by her matter. To ignore what is authentically shocking about O'Connor is to misread her weakly. It is not her incessant violence that is troublesome but rather her passionate endorsement of that violence as the only way to startle her secular readers into a spiritual awareness. As a visionary writer, she is determined to take us by force, to bear us away so that we may be open to the possibility of grace. Her unbelieving reader is represented by the grandmother in the famous story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find":

She saw the man's face twisted close to her own as if he were going to cry and she murmured, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" She reached out and touched him on the shoulder. The Misfit sprang back as if a snake had bitten him and shot her three times through the chest. Then he put his gun down on the ground and took off his glasses and began to clean them.

That murmur of recognition is what matters for O'Connor. The Misfit speaks for her in his mordant observation: "She would of been a good woman, if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life." Secular critic as I am, I need to murmur: "Surely that does make goodness a touch too strenuous?" But O'Connor anticipates our wounded outcries of nature against grace, since we understandably prefer a vision that corrects nature without abolishing it. Young Tarwater himself, as finely recalcitrant a youth as Huckleberry Finn, resists not only Rayber but the tuition of old Tarwater. A kind of swamp fox, like the Revolutionary hero for whom he was named, the boy Tarwater waits for his

own call, and accepts his own prophetic election only after he has baptized his idiot cousin Bishop by drowning him, and even then only in consequence of having suffered a homosexual rape by the Devil himself. O'Connor's audacity reminds us of the Faulkner of *Sanctuary* and the West of *A Cool Million*. Her theology purports to be Roman Catholicism, but her sensibility is Southern Gothic, Jacobean in the mode of the early T. S. Eliot, and even Gnostic, in the rough manner of Carlyle, a writer she is likely never to have read.

I myself find it a critical puzzle to read her two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, and her two books of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and then to turn from her fiction to her occasional prose in *Mystery and Manners*, and her letters in *The Habit of Being*. The essayist and letter-writer denounces Manichaeism, Jansenism, and all other deviations from normative Roman Catholicism, while the storyteller seems a curious blend of the ideologies of Simone Weil reading the New Testament into the *Iliad*'s "poem of force" and of René Girard assuring us that there can be no return of the sacred without violence. Yet the actual O'Connor, in her letters, found Weil "comic and terrible," portraying the perpetual waiter for grace as an "angular intellectual proud woman approaching God inch by inch with ground teeth," and I suspect she would have been as funny about the violent thematicism of Girard.

To find something of a gap between O'Connor as lay theologian and O'Connor as a storyteller verging upon greatness may or may not be accurate but in any case intends to undervalue neither the belief nor the fiction. I suspect though that the fiction's implicit theology is very different from what O'Connor thought it to be, a difference that actually enhances the power of the novels and stories. It is not accidental that *As I Lay Dying* and *Miss Lonelyhearts* were the only works of fiction that O'Connor urged upon Robert Fitzgerald, or that her own prose cadences were haunted always by the earlier rather than the later Eliot. *The Waste Land*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Miss Lonelyhearts* are not works of the Catholic imagination but rather of that Gnostic pattern Gershom Scholem termed "redemption through sin." *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear It Away*, and stories like "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and the merciless "Parker's Back," take place in the same cosmos as *The Waste Land*, *As I Lay Dying*, and *Miss Lonelyhearts*. This world is the American version of the cosmological emptiness that the ancient Gnostics called the *kenoma*, a sphere ruled by a demiurge who has usurped the alien God, and who has exiled God out of history and beyond the reach of our prayers.

## II

In recognizing O'Connor's fictive universe as being essentially Gnostic, I dissent not only from her own repudiation of heresy but from the sensitive reading

of Jefferson Humphries, who links O'Connor to Proust in an "aesthetic of violence":

For O'Connor, man has been his own demiurge, the author of his own fall, the keeper of his own cell. . . .

The chief consequence of this partly willful, partly inherited alienation from the sacred is that the sacred can only intrude upon human perception as a violence, a rending of the fabric of daily life.

On this account, which remains normative, whether Hebraic or Catholic, we are fallen into the *kenoma* through our own culpability. In the Gnostic formulation, creation and fall were one and the same event, and all that can save us is a certain spark within us, a spark that is no part of the creation but rather goes back to the original abyss. The grandeur or sublimity that shines through the ruined creation is a kind of abyss-radiance, whether in Blake or Carlyle or the early Eliot or in such novelistic masters of the grotesque as Faulkner, West, and O'Connor.

The ugliest of O'Connor's stories, yet one of the strongest, is "A View of the Woods" in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Its central characters are the seventy-nine-year-old Mr. Fortune, and his nine-year-old granddaughter, Mary Fortune Pitts. I am uncertain which of the two is the more abominable moral character or hideous human personality, partly because they resemble one another so closely in selfishness, obduracy, false pride, sullenness, and just plain meanness. At the story's close, a physical battle between the two leaves the little girl a corpse, throttled and with her head smashed upon a rock, while her grandfather suffers a heart attack, during which he has his final "view of the woods," in one of O'Connor's typically devastating final paragraphs:

Then he fell on his back and looked up helplessly along the bare trunks into the tops of the pines and his heart expanded once more with a convulsive motion. It expanded so fast that the old man felt as if he were being pulled after it through the woods, felt as if he were running as fast as he could with the ugly pines toward the lake. He perceived that there would be a little opening there, a little place where he could escape and leave the woods behind him. He could see it in the distance already, a little opening where the white sky was reflected in the water. It grew as he ran toward it until suddenly the whole lake opened up before him, riding majestically in little corrugated folds toward his feet. He realized suddenly that he could not swim and that he had not bought the boat. On both sides of him he saw that the gaunt trees had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance. He

looked around desperately for someone to help him but the place was deserted except for one huge yellow monster which sat to the side, as stationary as he was, gorging itself on clay.

The huge yellow monster is a bulldozer, and so is the dying Mr. Fortune, and so was the dead Mary Fortune Pitts. What sustains our interest in such anti-pathetic figures in so grossly unsympathetic a world? O'Connor's own commentary does not help answer the question, and introduces a bafflement quite its own:

The woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol. They walk across the water, they are bathed in a red light, and they in the end escape the old man's vision and march off over the hills. The name of the story is a view of the woods and the woods alone are pure enough to be a Christ symbol if anything is. Part of the tension of the story is created by Mary Fortune and the old man being images of each other but opposite in the end. One is saved and the other is damned [*sic*] and there is no way out of it, it must be pointed out and underlined. Their fates are different. One has to die first because one kills the other, but you have read it wrong if you think they die in different places. The old man dies by her side; he only thinks he runs to the edge of the lake, that is his vision.

What divine morality it can be that saves Mary Fortune and damns her wretched grandfather is beyond my ken, but the peculiarities of O'Connor's sense of the four last things transcend me at all times, anyway. What is more interesting is O'Connor's own final view of the woods. Her sacramental vision enables her to see Christ in "the gaunt trees [that] had thickened into mysterious dark files that were marching across the water and away into the distance." Presumably their marching away is emblematic of Mr. Fortune's damnation, so far as O'Connor is concerned. As a reader of herself, I cannot rank O'Connor very high here. Surely Mary Fortune is as damnable and damned as her grandfather, and the woods are damnable and damned also. They resemble not the normative Christ but the Jesus of the Gnostic texts, whose phantom only suffers upon the cross while the true Christ laughs far off in the alien heavens, in the ultimate abyss.

O'Connor's final visions are more equivocal than she evidently intended. Here is the conclusion of "Revelation":

Until the sun slipped finally behind the tree line, Mrs. Turpin remained there with her gaze bent to them as if she were absorbing some abysmal life-giving knowledge. At last she lifted her head.

There was only a purple streak in the sky, cutting through a field of crimson and leading, like an extension of the highway, into the descending dusk. She raised her hands from the side of the pen in a gesture hieratic and profound. A visionary light settled in her eyes. She saw the streak as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. She lowered her hands and gripped the rail of the hog pen, her eyes small but fixed unblinkingly on what lay ahead. In a moment the vision faded but she remained where she was, immobile.

At length she got down and turned off the faucet and made her slow way on the darkening path to the house. In the woods around her the invisible cricket choruses had struck up, but what she heard were the voices of the souls climbing upward into the starry field and shouting hallelujah.

This is meant to burn away false or apparent virtues, and yet consumes not less than everything. In O'Connor's mixed realm, which is neither nature nor grace, Southern reality nor private phantasmagoria, all are necessarily damned, not by an aesthetic of violence but by a Gnostic aesthetic in which there is no knowing unless the knower becomes one with the known. Her Catholic moralism masked from O'Connor something of her own aesthetic of the grotesque. Certainly her essay on "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" evades what is central in her own praxis:

Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. That is a large

statement, and it is dangerous to make it, for almost anything you say about Southern belief can be denied in the next breath with equal propriety. But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn't convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God. Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive. They cast strange shadows, particularly in our literature. In any case, it is when the freak can be sensed as a figure for our essential displacement that he attains some depth in literature.

The freakish displacement here is from "wholeness," which is then described as the state of having been made in the image or likeness of God. But that mode, displacement, is not what is operative in O'Connor's fiction. Her own favorite, among her people, is young Tarwater, who is not a freak, and who is so likeable because he values his own freedom above everything and anyone, even his call as a prophet. We are moved by Tarwater because of his recalcitrance, because he is the Huck Finn of visionaries. But he moves O'Connor, even to identification, because of his inescapable prophetic vocation. It is the interplay between Tarwater fighting to be humanly free, and Tarwater besieged by his great-uncle's training, by the internalized Devil, and most of all by O'Connor's own ferocious religious zeal, that constitutes O'Connor's extraordinary artistry. Her pious admirers to the contrary, O'Connor would have bequeathed us even stronger novels and stories, of the eminence of Faulkner's, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness.



JOHN HAWKES

*Flannery O'Connor's Devil*

Eventually students of literature may come to think of Flannery O'Connor not only in terms of coldness, detachment and "black" humor but also in terms of an older or more familiar tradition. In a letter not long ago she said, "I think I would admit to writing what Hawthorne called 'romances'. . . . I feel more of a kinship with Hawthorne than with any other American writer. . . ." Surely such an expression of kinship is a sober one, coming as it does from a comic writer whose humor was described as "slam-bang" and whose style was called "as balefully direct as a death sentence" by *Time* magazine. But of course this comic writer is a serious writer—say, in her moral preoccupations, her poetic turn of mind and incredible uses of paradox—and her remark about her affinity with Hawthorne deserves juxtaposition, it seems to me, with a statement such as this one from Edwin Honig's book on allegory: "Melville's problem, like Hawthorne's, was to find a method whereby a vigorous moral and aesthetic authority could be recreated in fiction. For him, as for his predecessors, the challenge was to map out the relation of the unknown country of allegory to the known countries and conditions of contemporary actuality."

That this statement is more appropriate to Flannery O'Connor than to most other contemporary American writers; that the problem and challenge it describes are curiously hers; that the authority it describes is precisely what lies behind her "brutal" laughter; that "unknown country" and "actuality" are precisely what her fiction combines in a mercilessly pleasurable tension—all this is reason enough for making the juxtaposition above. And also reason enough for raising and perhaps evading the final question of the extent to which Flannery

O'Connor's work should be considered allegorical. But here I must mention my faith in the occult nature of minor coincidence since it was Melville's granddaughter, a lady I was once privileged to know in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who first urged me to read the fiction of Flannery O'Connor, and—further—since this experience occurred just at the time I had discovered the short novels of Nathanael West.

At that time—about ten years ago—the sudden confluence of West and Flannery O'Connor to me suggested twin guffawing peals of thunder (the figure is borrowed from "The Life You Save May Be Your Own") above a dead landscape quite ready for new humor, new vision, new and more meaningful comic treatments of violence. Though he died in 1940, West is the one writer who, along with Flannery O'Connor, deserves singular attention as a rare American satirist. I would propose that West and Flannery O'Connor are very nearly alone today in their pure creation of "aesthetic authority," and would also propose, of course, that they are very nearly alone in their employment of the devil's voice as vehicle for their satire or for what we may call their true (or accurate) vision of our godless actuality. Their visions are different. And yet, as we might expect, these two comic writers are unique in sharing a kind of inverted attraction for the reality of our absurd condition.

We may think of satire as "centralizing a dominant ideal by means of irony and analogy," and also as a form which "demolishes man's image of himself as a rational creature." It may be that most generally in West's satiric fictions the "dominant ideal," never more than implied, is merely the serenity of dissolution, or release from the pains of sexual struggle and from the dead-end of an impossible striving toward God, all of this brought to "pitch" (to use Faulkner's word) by the comedy of the sexual struggle itself. Though Flannery O'Connor's "dominant ideal" is likely to be as difficult to discover as West's, it is nonetheless an absolute of which she is perfectly aware. She writes: "I don't think you should write something as long as a novel around anything that is not of the gravest concern to you and everybody else and for me this is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it that we breathe in with the air of the times." Obviously West would never have made such a statement, and the polarity of the religious positions of these two writers is borne out in their novels.

West's preoccupation with the "Christ business" begins as joke in *The Dream Life of Balzo Snell*, reaches a partly confused and sentimental climax in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, and in *The Day of the Locust* finally dwindles to sporadic and surface satires on the freak Hollywood church as bad answer. Whereas Flannery O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, concerns a circuit preacher's grandson who is so violently opposed to Christ that in the end, after an immolation that involves self-blinding (among other things), he is last seen by his worldly landlady