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## Introduction

MICHAEL KREYLING

ABOUT fifteen years ago, opening his review of *The Habit of Being* (1979 [henceforth *HB*]), a selection of Flannery O'Connor's letters, Robert Towers was startled "to recall that Flannery O'Connor would be only in her mid-fifties if she were alive today" (3). It is only a little less startling today, almost three decades after the writer's death in 1964, to realize that she would be "only" seventy this year, quite young enough to enjoy (if enjoyment is in fact a plausible description for what O'Connor might have felt) the veneration, awe, controversy, and simple hoopla that swirls around her life and work. I think she would have enjoyed it all. She wrote to one of her friends: "I seem to attract the lunatic fringe mainly" (*HB* 82).

You can, for example, buy a coffee mug with a cartoon of O'Connor baked into the glaze. She stares out at you with heavy-lidded seriousness, holding a Christian Bible and backed by the spread tail of a peacock – her trademarks. Text on the mug ticks off the major points of the O'Connor myth. She died young of a particularly sinister disease, systemic lupus erythematosus. She lived most of her thirty-nine years (1925–1964) in Milledgeville, Georgia, with her mother, Regina Cline O'Connor, on a farm called Andalusia. "Her stories [are] violent, bizarre, and teeming with metaphor and symbolism," the mug continues. One of them, unnamed on the mug but well known to her many readers, has to do with "a reluctant atheist who puts his eyes out with lye [sic] and walks around with gravel in his shoes." It's lime Hazel Motes rubs into his eyes – but the myth can tolerate small errors of fact.

It is characteristic of our fin de siècle, this smothering of the real with licensed merchandise "tie-ins." O'Connor was just a few

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decades early with Haze Motes and *Wise Blood* (1952). If she were alive today, a 40th Anniversary Edition of the novel, complete with a marketing package, might well have brought her wealth she would not have been too old to enjoy. Her mother survives. If Flannery O'Connor had inherited her blood instead of her father's, carrying the susceptibility to lupus. . . .

As a sort of commemoration of the nonevent, this volume of "New Essays" on *Wise Blood* appears. It has been assembled not to reinforce the consensus on O'Connor's literary reputation, but to shake it a little out of complacent habits. In his indispensable essay on the state of O'Connor criticism, Frederick Crews ruefully predicts that in "the current iconoclastic mood of academic trend-setters . . . , O'Connor's stock is due for what Wall Street calls a correction" (146). Crews does not undertake the correction himself, and he assesses those who do (some of the contributors to this volume) with a skeptical eye. But it is my belief that methodological and theoretical experimentation does more good for the life of literary discourse than the repetition of a certain set of formulaic phrases that merely impersonate understanding. Without innovations in reading her work, O'Connor would become so familiar as to disappear, leaving only coffee mugs and a few tired phrases.

But the establishment of this monolithic O'Connor industry is instructive in its own right, and it is useful to read the novel with some sense of the canonical reputation it seems to have launched. In general two causes seem uppermost in the list of reasons. The first is that O'Connor's fiction is so rewardingly teachable. As Crews points out, O'Connor was taught to write fiction in the New Critical tradition, and it is therefore no surprise that the rest of us also taught to read that way should find her fiction so accessible (145). O'Connor herself never made a secret of her methods. She recommended the foundational New Critical textbook, Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Fiction* (1943), as a "book that has been of invaluable help (HB 83, 283) whenever she was asked for advice. Moreover, O'Connor sent virtually everything she wrote (including every draft of *Wise Blood*) to Caroline Gordon for editorial approval. Gordon, a novelist herself, was also one of the underacknowledged builders of practical criticism

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out of the general tenets of New Criticism. The editorial apparatus in *The House of Fiction* (1950), which she co-edited with her husband Allen Tate, is almost all Gordon's work. O'Connor was in thrall to Gordon's counsel, and Gordon undertook, in a few critical comments, to direct critical responses to O'Connor along New Critical (and Christian) lines. The reading, teaching, and learning of O'Connor's fiction is stuck in the New Critical gear, and the essays in this volume aim to wrest our habitual response into unfamiliar rhythms.

The second reason why O'Connor's fiction is interpreted with such solid consensus is that almost no one doubts her own testimony as to its Christian meaning. Crews again puts his finger on the problem. One of the earliest critics to point out and dissent from the stringent religious message in O'Connor's work was the novelist John Hawkes, who suspected in 1962 that O'Connor was rather too enamored of the Devil she professed to warn her readers against. His essay triggered several responses defending the writer (of which more later in this introduction) and, quoting Crews, "The Hawkes–O'Connor debate has not subsided in the quarter-century since O'Connor's death. It is the vortex into which nearly every other question about her work gets inevitably drawn, and there is never a shortage of volunteers to replace the original antagonists" (156).

The result of these serial autos-da-fe is nearly five decades of repetitive affirmations of the theological message believed to inform O'Connor's work, reinforced by the tacit belief that her considerable suffering crowned her word with a special truth status. Interestingly, early reviewers of *Wise Blood*, those who read it as a first novel by a young, unknown woman from Georgia, were quite skeptical of the religious power of its characters and message. As the O'Connor persona gained greater circulation, the prestige of *Wise Blood* has grown until it looms as one of the most significant religious novels in American literary history.

*Wise Blood*, and all of O'Connor's other work (a surprisingly slight oeuvre for such a reputation: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* [short stories], 1955; *The Violent Bear It Away* [a novel], 1960; and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* [short stories], 1965) are usually seen as instances of the same metaphysical "vision." As Chris-

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tian tradition interprets the Bible as expressing one Word in each and all of its many parts, so is O'Connor's fiction given a similar unity, wholeness, and transcendental authority. The essays in the current volume tend to question this process and accretion.

“Fiction doesn't lie, but it can't tell the whole truth”

Flannery O'Connor, through her control of her own image as writer, as Southerner, as Catholic, as woman, and so on, still controls our understanding of her life and that life's connections with the work. She was not unaware of the critics' hunger for biographical detail. In 1956 she wrote to “A,” her anonymous correspondent:

Fiction doesn't lie, but it can't tell the whole truth. What would you make out about me just from reading “Good Country People”? Plenty, but not the whole story. Anyway, you have to look at a novel or a story as a novel or a story; as saying something about life colored by the writer, not about the writer colored by life. (HB 158)

Even that conceded “plenty” has been underappreciated by her readers and critics.

Mary Flannery O'Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1925, the only child of Edward Francis and Regina Cline O'Connor. The writer's father died of lupus in 1938. O'Connor remembered her father's death with a sort of tight-lipped stoicism. To the poet Robert Lowell, she wrote: “My father had it [lupus] some twelve or fifteen years ago but at that time there was nothing for it but the undertaker” (HB 57). The family was in Milledgeville, Georgia, at the time, the hometown of her mother's family, where they had moved to take advantage of job opportunities during the Depression. O'Connor completed high school and college in town, showing a talent for drawing cartoons and a penchant for mordant commentary on the social rigors of growing up. She wrote to “A”:

This pride in the tin leg comes from an old scar. I was, in my early days, forced to take dancing to throw me into the company of other children and to make me graceful. Nothing I hated worse than the company of other children and I vowed I'd see them all in

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hell before I would make the first graceful move. The lessons went on for a number of years but I won. In a certain sense. (*HB* 145–46)

Flannery O'Connor took a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. For several months in late 1948 and early 1949, she worked at Yaddo on her novel, *Wise Blood*, which had won the Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award in 1948. From her letters in these early years of professional writing, it seems that O'Connor was determined to make that life in New York. After Yaddo she lived in New York apartments and in rural Connecticut with Robert and Sally Fitzgerald. After a falling out with Rinehart, which was committed to publish the novel, O'Connor took the manuscript to Harcourt Brace. While awaiting publication, in the winter of 1950–1, she came down with the symptoms later diagnosed as lupus. She returned to Milledgeville and, except for short trips away from home, lived there for the rest of her life.

I am doing fairly well these days, though I am practically bald-headed on top and have a watermelon face. I think that this is going to be permanent. (*HB* 55)

No one denies the significance of systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE) on O'Connor's life and work; few hazard a guess at what the particular pathology of the disease (and the treatment) did to O'Connor's fiction. In most critical statements, we seldom get beyond the obvious: living with a terminal disease made O'Connor more sensitive to the meanings in life. "What you have to measure out," she wrote to Robert Lowell, "you come to observe closer, or so I tell myself" (*HB* 57). One of those meanings must have impressed O'Connor, who was a connoisseur of irony: she had become one of her own grotesques.

When she learned that she had SLE, the most virulent form of a spectrum of lupus conditions, O'Connor must also have learned that she had a 40 percent chance of surviving three years after the diagnosis. She must also have known that she was in for a particularly painful and disfiguring disease. Her first symptoms were the fatigue and arthralgia (aching in the joints) common to SLE. She had also to worry about the characteristic butterfly lesions across

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the bridge of the nose and cheeks, and additional sores on the arms, back, neck, and other parts exposed to light. Like AIDS, which it resembles in some general ways, SLE makes a public spectacle of its victims, turning the body into a vivid display of illness. The figuring on Parker's back, in the last story O'Connor was to work on before she died, might owe something to the Kaposi sarcoma-like lesions some lupus sufferers have endured.

There was also hair loss (caused by the disease and by some forms of treatment), problems with blood chemistry, kidney problems and the possibility of renal failure (this was to be, in fact, the immediate cause of death in August 1964), and the specter of psychiatric and psychological problems. The treatment – in the first years of O'Connor's life with lupus – could be as bad as the disease itself. The state of the art in the early 1950s called for treatment with ACTH (adrenocorticotrophic hormone, derived from the pituitary glands of pigs). The side effects of ACTH, a steroid, were unwelcome: swelling of the fatty tissues of the body (often in the face); deterioration of bone; loss of muscle tone; tumors (O'Connor went to the "cutting table" just before her death [HB 567]); insomnia; fatigue.

At one time or another in her life with lupus, O'Connor suffered all of these pains. While her dosage of ACTH was still being adjusted, O'Connor suffered severe joint pain and muscle loss in her legs. She wrote to "A" about her acquaintance with crutches:

I am learning to walk on crutches and I feel like a large stiff anthropoid ape who has no cause to be thinking about St. Thomas [Aquinas] or Aristotle. (HB 104)

One thinks of the paternal wise blood of which Enoch Emery boasts; it also led him into an apesuit. Six months later, x-rays revealed what appeared to be permanent loss of bone in the hip joint.

I'm informed that it's crutches for me from now on out. Putting a cap on it [the bone] won't be possible because the bone is diseased. So, so much for that. I will henceforth be a structure with flying buttresses. . . . (HB 151; ellipsis in original)

Although there was remission in 1958, after a trip to Lourdes (post hoc, propter hoc O'Connor did not decide), she continued

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to suffer bone problems: she broke a rib coughing too strenuously (*HB* 306) and two years later, in 1960, the bone deterioration resumed in her jaw.

Like that of many AIDS sufferers, O'Connor's suffering was acute and acutely public; her body wore its disease for all to see. She could hope for no happiness through the body. For many critics within the consensus, to argue that O'Connor's use of the body means the flesh in general, and is part of her religious vision, seems only part of the issue. The new essay here, by Patricia Yaeger, explores the condition of the female adult body as one of the preconditions of meaning in *Wise Blood* – without the religious or metaphorical escape hatch.

Flannery O'Connor died in an Atlanta hospital on August 4, 1964; she was thirty-nine. In the thirty years since her death, her life and work have fueled an industry that rivals that of William Faulkner. When the Library of America published her *Complete Works* (1988), she became the first woman and only the second resident of this century (Faulkner had preceded her) to be so publicly canonized. There are now several dozen booklength studies of her work in print – as yet there is no biography – and several hundred articles. National and international conferences meet to discuss her work. No Southern writer (possibly no other American writer of this century) is the subject of so many masters theses and doctoral dissertations. A first French edition of *La sagesse dans la sang* is quoted at \$175. And, of course, there is the collectible merchandise.

If we know so much, why do we need more? Isn't *Wise Blood*, the first of O'Connor's two novels, so well known that a good percentage of literate Americans, reading of the "reluctant atheist" who did penance by filling his shoes with rocks, could accurately identify the protagonist of the novel, Hazel Motes? The problem is precisely that familiarity. There has been so much criticism of O'Connor and of *Wise Blood* in so relatively brief a time (as literary reputations go) that the orthodox line is narrow, deep, and resistant to revision. This volume of four "new essays" exists to open new ways of seeing and understanding the novel, and the critical establishment that guards the meaning. We assume that you have read the novel, so we engage in no plot synopsis.

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“My background and my inclinations are both Catholic. . . .”

It is a commonplace of O'Connor criticism, originating almost at the start, that her Catholic faith is central to her meaning, and that if a critic ignores, mistakes, or objects to that faith she or he will arrive at distortion and error. To begin otherwise than with Catholic “vision” is to be, as John Hawkes intimated, of the Devil's party. O'Connor never allowed a grain of doubt on this issue.

Early in 1954, in response to a letter of appreciation for *Wise Blood*, O'Connor wrote:

My background and my inclinations are both Catholic and I think this is very apparent in the book. Something is usually said about Kafka in connection with *Wise Blood* but I have never succeeded in making my way through *The Castle* or *The Trial* and wouldn't pretend to know anything about Kafka. (HB 68)

She knew enough, though, to tease her mother:

Regina is getting very literary. “Who is this Kafka?” she says. “People ask me.” A German Jew, I says, I think. He wrote a book about a man that turns into a roach. “Well, I can't tell people *that*,” she says. (HB 33)

There was less teasing about Catholicism. There were those who believed, or claimed to, and they could be manhandled. But there was always, beyond and untouched by the world, the truth. O'Connor wrote to “A”:

I think most people come to the Church by means the Church does not allow, else there would be no need their getting to her at all. However, this is true inside as well, as the operation of the Church is entirely set up for the sinner; which creates much misunderstanding among the smug. (HB 93)

And:

But I can never agree with you that the Incarnation, or any truth, has to satisfy emotionally to be right (and I would not agree that for the natural man the Incarnation does not satisfy emotionally). . . . There is a question whether faith can or is supposed to be emotionally satisfying. I must say that the thought of everyone lolling about in an emotionally satisfying faith is repug-



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nant to me. I believe that we are ultimately directed Godward but that this journey is often impeded by emotion. . . . To see Christ as God and man is probably no more difficult today than it has always been, even if today there seem to be more reasons to doubt. For you it may be a matter of not being able to accept what you call a suspension of the laws of the flesh and the physical, but for my part I think that when I know what the laws of the flesh and the physical really are, then I will know what God is. We know them as we see them, not as God sees them. For me it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. (*HB* 99–100)

This lengthy passage makes clear one important grounding for the religious vision of O'Connor: she preferred to see the empirical world – the world of the flesh, of the body – as a set of symbols for the metaphysical. The “true laws of the flesh and the physical,” in her vision, were precisely those that seemed to the unredeemed eye to be wishful and spiritual: virgin birth, Incarnation, resurrection. The “actual” or “everyday” existed: out of it you made art. But it existed as a set of signs only, indicative of a Divine Presence: a Reality over and above reality. O'Connor operated, as many critics maintain, on the anagogical level not the historical.

O'Connor's type of belief was to remain constant throughout her life and her work. Even under the assaults of lupus and the equally devastating treatment, she maintained that the “glorified body” of the resurrection was the real body, not the sorry flesh one carted through history. This view could, to some critics, make O'Connor seem hard or mean, but she herself rested serenely in possession of the truth. She felt no allegiance to the cause of human beings trying to make life better for themselves. In 1959, for example, she wrote to “A” on the subject of the Church's stand against birth control:

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 [i.e., priests] 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; ellipsis in original)

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Very early on, the critics took up the challenge of O'Connor's stern faith and made it the passageway to the understanding of her fiction. Robert Drake, in *Flannery O'Connor: A Critical Essay* (1966), writes that O'Connor has come to call the wicked to repentance, especially "modern intellectuals" who have fore-sworn Christianity and its traditional values (15). *Wise Blood*, Drake asserts, is just such an emphatic call; if it falls short of perfection, it is only because it is deficient in art: "her shattering perceptions about fallen man have not sufficiently coalesced into a strong thematic design" (18). The spirit, in other words, is willing, but the artistic flesh is weak.

This stubborn tradition of seeing O'Connor's work, especially the first novel, as theologically exceptional – entitled to a truth status over and above that which we accord "mere" literature – has overpowered nearly every other approach. Sister Kathleen Feeley's *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (1972) links O'Connor's technique and meaning to the narrative traditions of the Christian Bible; the blindness and sight tropes of *Wise Blood* are directly linked, for example, with similar tropes in the New Testament (4). Feeley's reading carries the added authority of Caroline Gordon, who acted as O'Connor's chief literary guru during the latter's life and wrote a foreword to *Voice of the Peacock*. Gordon, addressing the charge that O'Connor used too much violence in her plots and too many freaks in her casts of characters, claims that she did so "because they [the freaks] have been deprived of the blood of Christ" (x). Technique and meaning, profane and sacred, are merged in the criticism of O'Connor.

John R. May's *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor* (1976) claims the privilege of the sacred for O'Connor's work – and for those who participate in the criticism of it, as long as they do so with good hearts. O'Connor, May contends, always knew the truth, but critics have had to work by a process of dialectic toward a vital consensus that coincides with the author's vision. The critical process May describes is similar to that by which the Bible is progressively interpreted toward the divine truth. In both cases, O'Connor and the Bible, "validity in interpretation" can be guaranteed because the text under study is divinely inspired: