

ANALYSIS

The Violent Bear It Away (1960)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

“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.”

Flannery O'Connor

“It is the best example in Flannery O'Connor's work of the transplantation-prophecy-return motif; in fact, the novel is divided into three parts which correspond neatly to the three phrases. In the first section, Tarwater prepares to leave home, after the death of his great-uncle, to join his uncle Rayber. The long middle section is the strange working out of the prophecy which ends in Tarwater's baptism-drowning of Rayber's idiot son, Bishop. The final section is the return to Powderhead....

Tarwater is another authentically American boy, in the tradition of Huck Finn and the young Ike McCaslin, who goes through a typically American initiation before he can become a man. His 'education' and character formation are intimately linked to Flannery O'Connor's South... 'a breeding ground for prophets.' Tarwater's confused attempts at converting Rayber and baptizing Bishop can easily be likened to Ike McCaslin's ambivalent feelings about the bear hunt in Faulkner's *The Bear* or more cautiously to Huck's uncertainty about Jim's destiny in Twain's novel. In each case the spiritual resolution which turns the boy into a man is crucial.

The link with Faulkner has already been pointed out by several reviewers of *The Violent Bear It Away*. Vivian Mercier writing in the *Hudson Review* (Autumn 1960) has said that 'all the characters are Faulknerian grotesques, including the idiot's atheist father.' Louis D. Rubin had earlier pointed out similarities between the Bundrens of *As I Lay Dying* and Flannery O'Connor's characters in the Autumn 1955 edition of the *Sewanee Review*. It can be pointed out convincingly, I think, that the burial complications in *The Violent Bear It Away* are at least related to the funeral procession in *As I Lay Dying*. Tarwater's great-uncle had insisted that he be given Christian burial rites. Tarwater, prompted by a voice which follows him around almost like his conscience in reverse, decides to set fire to the house which contains the great-uncle's corpse.

Upon his return to Powderhead in the third part of the novel, he discovers that despite his efforts the uncle was granted proper burial through the unexpected intervention of a Negro, Buford. In a curious way the novel gains a kind of structure through the repeated references to the burial in much the same way that *As I Lay Dying* is constructed about the journey to Jefferson with the corpse of Addie Bundren. In both novels there is also an elaborate series of observers who pass judgment on the proceedings and form a consensus to counterbalance the eccentricities of the participants in the action. Tarwater's behavior is viewed with some surprise by a salesman who offers him a ride on his way to Rayber's house. A truck driver serves a similar function as Tarwater makes his way back to Powderhead. Another observer, Buford, is waiting for him there to condemn him for failing to give his great-uncle a Christian burial. We get this balance between the 'grotesques' and the workaday world.”

Melvin J. Friedman

“Flannery O’Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction”
English Journal LI
(April 1962) 233-43

“In *The Violent Bear It Away* the world outside the God-intoxicated hardly exists at all, is almost without relevance to them. The novel begins with the death of Francis Marion Tarwater’s great-uncle on his patch of ground in a forest almost entirely cut off from civilization. Tarwater is a boy of fourteen....The boy rebels against the doom the old man has placed upon him and in a spirit of inquiry seeks out his cousin, a schoolmaster and an angry atheist, in the neighboring town.

Rayber, who has himself as a boy been under the old man’s thrall and believes his life to have been ruined in consequence, welcomes Tarwater almost as a lost son. But the boy is suspicious and will not commit himself. The novel is a confrontation between religion and skepticism, though both in a non-intellectual sense, as ways of life; and it becomes apparent that Rayber, for all his furious repudiations of the old prophet, is as much his child as Tarwater is. In the end Tarwater goes back to the patch of cultivated land in the forest and hears his call: ‘Go warn the children of God of the terrible speed of Mercy.’ He takes up his burden and leaves: ‘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.’

The circumstances of his environment and upbringing, to say nothing of his creator’s original vision, set Tarwater apart as a special case. He is his great-uncle born again, and though he is a boy he is not to be confused with the child as Noble Savage, the human being uncorrupted by society. He has no kinship with Huckleberry Finn, in whose being the child as Noble Savage first makes his appearance in American fiction. Similarly, he has no kinship with Salinger’s Holden Caulfield.”

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in the United States
(Dutton 1965) 308-09

“*The Violent Bear It Away* [is] a novel populated almost entirely by divided characters and doppelgangers. The rending struggle within young Tarwater which is the burden of the book is resolved not in an act of reintegration but in a ritual exorcism, a self-purification by fire that consumes the grinning ‘friend’ who has shadowed him from the start. That friend is of course overtly presented as demonic, but he also embodies the rational, skeptical, rebellious, ironic side of Tarwater, and his destruction is a violent repudiation of an essential part of the boy. Tarwater achieves at the end a singleness of self and purpose, but the cost of that achievement is appalling.”

Frederick Asals
“The Double”
Flannery O’Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982)

“*The Violent Bear It Away*, which appeared in 1960, further enhanced her reputation, both for better and for worse. The people who appreciated what she was doing, and how well she was doing it, found it masterly, a finer book by far than *Wise Blood*. Those who had hated the stories, hated the new novel equally. It was just as complex and demanding as *Wise Blood*, but it was neither as funny nor as grotesque. It was, if anything, even more violent and unsettling in its denouement, and its religious challenge was more open. As had been the case with the first novel, one of the chief characters, old Mason Tarwater (who, although he dies on the first page, is a tremendous presence throughout the book) was seen mistakenly by some critics and readers as plain crazy. The author, however, privately confirmed him as in her view basically in the right, and declared herself to be behind him one hundred percent.

The living protagonist, Francis Marion Tarwater, aged fourteen, is an unconvincing and strayed prophet, not only called to this uncomfortable vocation by destiny, but ‘trained’ in it by his explosive great-uncle Mason, who has devoted himself to prophecy and moonshining and the education of the heir apparent on a remote farm in a clearing near a settlement called Powderhead, until his sudden death at the breakfast table. Having failed to carry out his first assignment, the proper burial of the old man in a grave marked by a

cross, young Tarwater sets off, ostensibly to demonstrate his refusal to carry out the second, as well. This was to be the baptism of his little cousin, Bishop, the idiot son of Tarwater's uncle in the city, George Rayber, a fanatical rationalist, teacher of psychology, who believes that he has escaped the powerful old man and his fervid Christian teachings, and wishes likewise to 'save' his nephew.

Accompanied and coached by an unseen new friend, a comic but sinister voice in his ear and mind, hideously embodied only in the final pages of the novel, Tarwater opposes and challenges his uncle and would-be mentor on every level of his being. Although the fierce boy accepts none of the schoolteacher's rationalism and psychology, neither does he accept his own previous formation and calling, whether in general or in the particular charge his dead great-uncle has laid upon him. If the old man suggests a red-clay John the Baptizer, an uncompromising voice bellowing in wilderness, the boy seems reminiscent of a sulky Jonah, stubbornly refusing to follow his vocation until he is forced to a final choice.

Tarwater's own inner battle against belief and acceptance and his simultaneous attraction to both, provides a dramatic subplot to his conflict with Rayber, and these two wars, with their stunning outcome, comprise the action of the novel. The underlying premise of the whole, however, is the author's belief, reflected in the old man, that baptism in Christ is a matter of life and death. Of the fearsome events in this novel, she wrote, 'I don't set out to be more drastic, but this happens automatically. If I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I know that for the larger percentage of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite; therefore I have to imbue this action with an awe and terror which will suggest its awful mystery. I have to distort the look of the thing in order to represent as I see them both the mystery and the fact.' Apart from four notes sounded by a thrush among the pines (again resonant of 'The Waste Land') at the beginning and end of the book, purely literary sources, or traces, even unconscious ones, are not apparent. Flannery O'Connor is never more uniquely herself than here.

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). But her peculiar strengths—her ability to convey real religious conviction, and the equal force of an individual's inner impulse to refuse and oppose it, and her dramatization of such conflict—are evident throughout, as are the wild humor and withering irony that characterize all her work, and the ambiguity which lends it much of its fascination. The novel is finely constructed. Architecture, joinery, and details of language and dialogue are superb. There is hardly a misplaced or unneeded word. Portraiture is memorable, and her painterly descriptions of the settings for the action mysteriously suggest a battleground for supernatural combat in which all of nature, as well, is taking part as witness. The world of the spirit and the world of matter, the invisible and the visible, she forcefully suggests, are inseparable."

Sally Fitzgerald
Introduction

Three by Flannery O'Connor
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xviii-xx

"*The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) takes its theme from Matthew II: 12, to the effect that the 'kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force,' or in O'Connor's phrase, 'bear it away.' In this her second and final novel, she has reassembled many of her by now familiar materials: the implicit and explicit violence of those who live intensely; the family that recalls the House of Atreus, lines of hatred and love which are indistinguishable; the preoccupation with baptism, damnation, redemption, which seems to enchant an entire society; bizarre, possessed people whom she makes familiar and apparently ordinary; a background society which seems diluted by contrast with her intense characters.

The structure of the novel is formed by a vertical line based on an extended family. The top of the line is a possessed great-uncle who lives with his young great-nephew, Tarwater, and instructs him in the ways of a God not unlike himself. Just beyond this line, slightly to the side, is another paternal figure for Tarwater, embodied in the stranger, a voice rather than a body. A countering parent, the stranger instructs Tarwater in how to escape the commandments of his great-uncle. But for the God-crazed boy, the stranger could also be a voice of the devil, and it upsets him because if he breaks from his great-uncle, as the voice counsels, then he isn't certain who and what he will be.

Directly in the vertical family line is the old man's nephew, Rayber, who is Tarwater's uncle. Rayber is a much more definite force than the stranger, in that he openly represents nonbelief and wishes to indoctrinate Tarwater in the ways of atheism; that is, in the ways of self-choice and self-appointed function. Rayber has himself fought to escape the old man, having been seized when he was seven and forcibly baptized. Further, when Rayber first tried to get hold of the boy, he went to the old man's farm, only to be shot in the leg and ear. In their vicarious roles, fathers and sons are competing with each other, by way of God's power, with death and damnation or salvation as the doom or reward. The conception is grand for a novel so deeply provincial: O'Connor's final effort to cut so extensively she could reach completely across the world by way of a thin line piercing the earth's skin.

There is, further, another son, and this is Rayber's idiot boy, named Bishop. Tarwater's mission is to baptize Bishop, and Rayber's mission is to prevent it. Yet Rayber is ambivalent, full of terrible love and terrible resentment that his child is an idiot. In a situation in which he thinks he can trust Tarwater, he lets him row the boy out into the middle of the lake, where Tarwater does indeed baptize Bishop by drowning him. He insists he only meant to drown him; the baptism was accidental, a by-product. With that, Tarwater has fulfilled his great-uncle's mission for him; he has forsaken his own direction for the ways of the old man, and he must return to the property, where he will be in charge. He has become like Cain and Ishmael, outcasts who identify with all those who have committed a preordained act.

The structural images for this shriek of a novel—it never simmers, but boils fiercely—are light and darkness, fire, mirrors and other forms of reflection, and even rape. Between his fulfillment of his great-uncle's mission and his return to the property, Tarwater is picked up and raped by a passing motorist; earlier, on his movement out to his mission—to baptize Bishop—he had been aided by a motorist named Meeks, who counseled success in the world. The mirrors, lights and darks, fires lead not only into Biblical metaphors but back toward the individual. For despite the religiosity of her material, O'Connor was very much a part of the 1950s. And her commitment to the self was typical, in that restraints, moral constraints, desire for expression warred with liberation, narcissism, inward turning.

What is most striking, despite the intensity, fire, and heaving passions, is the absence of any sexual undercurrent. Everyone who might have been involved sexually is dead or has vanished. Rayber's wife has run off; Tarwater was born in a car wreck, in which his mother, often referred to as a whore, was killed. Not only do no women of any sexual viability exist in the novel; the men yearn for little but the completion of their mission: God- or hate-filled, they have eschewed moderate or normal relationships. The sole act of sex is the homosexual rape of Tarwater by the motorist....

O'Connor has taken the 1950s sense of mission to its final point, to Tarwater's insistence: 'I only meant to drown him.' Here mission is fulfilled, a baptism by way of an ultimate act. Inadvertently or not, Tarwater works out the destiny of his great-uncle. The family line is completed by way of the mythical pattern of generational struggle and murder. An extended incest pattern is also apparent: all those wifeless and motherless men grouping, then consuming each other, culminating in the rape of the final scenes. That passing motorist, a surrogate father of sorts for Tarwater, also acts out the shadowy designs of fathers and sons. He drugs Tarwater, seizes him, as his great-uncle had, as Rayber tried, as he had Bishop....

Her bizarre, marginal outsiders are, for her, those whose feelings are central; whereas so-called normal society is diluted, pale, debilitated. Intermixed is a sense of social dialectics: a society that tries to hold together under onslaughts of the new.... One of the dangers in reading O'Connor is to stress her bizarreness, her Gothic strangeness, and to miss the social dialectic that is as much at her heart as it is at the heart of another writer once attacked for remissness, Jane Austen."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 231-33

"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.... 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...

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... 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....

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 Catholic, but her sensibility is Southern Gothic, Jacobean in the mode of the early T. S. Eliot... 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."

Harold Bloom, ed.
Flannery O'Connor
(Chelsea House/Modern Critical Views 1986) 1-4, 8

"In *The Violent Bear It Away*, the second novel, Mason...snuffs out his grand-nephew's hopes to develop beyond adolescence into an independent self responsible to the community. The pattern in the stories of a child's identity eclipsed by a parent's will is here represented in its most vivid form by the fate of Francis Tarwater. The novel ends as Francis mirrors the behavior of his uncle, who believes himself a prophet. Francis becomes like the 'jagged shadow' that leads him toward the perverse 'goal' of perpetuating his granduncle's will. This same pattern is seen in the stories when Nelson adopts Head's racist view of the city, when the child in 'A Circle in the Fire' acquires her mother's dread—the new misery she felt [which] on her mother looked old' and when Mary Fortune Pitts demonstrates a degree of aggression to match her grandfather's ruthless will."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 110

"O'Connor set great store by this work, and more than one critic has since declared it to be her masterpiece. At any rate, by the time it appeared her readers, at least some of them, had learned, as she had hoped they might, to look behind the comic, cartoonlike surface of her narratives for the action that she had meant them to take seriously. Here the action was the say of God's grace with fallen mankind in a world all but dominated by the devil, and she demonstrated that way with another story of a prophet, Francis Marion Tarwater, who was blind to the nature of the hound that was pursuing him. Tarwater, an orphan aged fourteen, has lived most of his life at Powderhead, a 'gaunt two-story shack' in the middle of a corn patch. There his great-uncle, a self-proclaimed prophet and recluse much given to violence, has provided him with Christian instruction and named him his successor. The elder Tarwater has also provided his nephew with specific instructions for his own burial (ten feet deep with a cross above) and directed him, as a first

assignment in his career as a prophet, to baptize a mentally retarded cousin then living in the city with his agonistic schoolteacher father.

Tarwater does not resist taking the role of prophet, but he considers his great-uncle a madman and an unreliable teacher and plans to begin his own career with a more appropriate project than baptizing an idiot. Consequently, he disregards the burial instructions and sets out for the city, determined to disregard the assignment as well. In his rebelliousness he is abetted by a mysterious stranger (presumably the devil) who appears from time to time with advice and suggestions to support his defection. Accordingly, when circumstances that Tarwater does not understand dictate that willy-nilly he encounter the child, whom he has tried desperately to avoid, he proceeds to drown him—in the process, however, inadvertently saying the words of baptism.

At this point, still failing to recognize the persistent action of grace in his life, he heads back to Powderland to begin again, once more encounters the devil, this time in the guise of a homosexual seducer, and at last recognizes his enemy. Now more furiously the prophet than his great-uncle ever was, he sets fire to the thicket where the seduction took place, receives a vision of Christ feeding the five thousand, and prepares to return to the somnolent city, this time as the violent agent of God's mercy."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 152-53

Michael Hollister (2014)