

COMMENTARY

The Violent Bear It Away (1960)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

This is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward. (Letter, 4 August 1962)

My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil. ('On Her Own Work,' *Mystery and Manners*, 1969: 118)

Now about Tarwater's future. He must of course not live to realize his mission, but die to realize it. The children of God I daresay will dispatch him pretty quick. Nor am I saying that he has a great mission or that God's solution for the problems of our particular world are prophets like Tarwater. Tarwater's mission might only be to baptize a few more idiots. The prophets in the Bible are only the great ones but there is doubtless unwritten sacred history like uncanonized saints. Someday if I get up enough courage I may write a story or a novella about Tarwater in the city. There would be no reformatory I assure you. That murder is forgotten by God and of no interest to society, and I would proceed quickly to show what the children of God do to him.... Many will think that the author shares Rayber's point of view and praise the book on account of it. This book is less grotesque than WB and...less funny.... (Letter, 25 July 1959)

The boy doesn't just get himself saved by the skin of his teeth, he in the end prepares to be a prophet himself and to accept what prophets can expect from their earthly lives (the worst)... The old man considers himself a prophet and...he has stolen the boy away from the school teacher in order to raise him up to take his place as a prophet when he dies. As soon as the old man dies, the boy is left alone with the threat of the Lord's call. He heads for the school teacher and the burden of the book is taken up with the struggle for the boy's soul between the dead uncle and the school teacher. The modern reader will identify himself with the school teacher, but it is the old man who speaks for me. (Letter, 13 September 1959)

I certainly do mean Tarwater's friend to be the Devil.... The man in the motor car was an actualization of Tarwater's friend and mentor, the Devil.... The general reader is going to think that violation is a piece of arbitrary grotesquery.... Meeks is one of those comic characters but...of the Devil because nothing in him resists the Devil. There's not much use to distinguish between them. In general the Devil can always be a subject for my kind of comedy.... More than the Devil I am interested in the indication of Grace, the moment when you know that Grace has been offered and accepted.... These moments are prepared for (by me anyway) by the intensity of the evil circumstances. It is the violation in the woods that brings home to Tarwater the real nature of his rejection. I couldn't have brought off the final vision without it. (Letter, 26 December 1959)

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. (Letter, 13 September 1960)

Rayber loving Bishop is interesting. He did love him, but throughout the book he was fighting his inherited tendency to mystical love. He had the idea that his love could be contained in Bishop but that if

Bishop were gone, there would be nothing to contain it and he would then love everything and specifically Christ. The point where Tarwater is drowning Bishop is the point where he has to choose. He makes the Satanic choice, and the inability to feel the pain of his loss is the immediate result. His collapse then may indicate that he is not going to be able to sustain his choice—but that is another book maybe. Rayber and Tarwater are really fighting the same current in themselves. Rayber wins out against it and Tarwater loses; Rayber achieves his own will, and Tarwater submits to his vocation. (Letter, 25 July 1962)

I think the strongest of Rayber's psychological pulls are in the direction that he does not ultimately choose, so I don't believe he exhibits in any sense a lack of free will. You might make out a case of sorts for Tarwater being determined since his great uncle has expressly trained him to be a prophet and to expect the Lord's call, but actually neither of them exhibits a lack of free will. An absence of free will in these characters would mean an absence of conflict in them, whereas they spend all their time fighting within themselves, drive against drive. Tarwater wrestles with the Lord and Rayber wins. Both examples of free will in action. (Letter, 12 August 1962)