

COMMENTARY

Wise Blood (1952)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

During this time I was more or less living my life and H. Motes's too and as my disease affected the joints, I conceived the notion that I would eventually become paralyzed and was going blind and that in the book I had spelled out my own course... (Letter, 25 November 1955)

Wise Blood is about a Protestant saint, written from the point of view of a Catholic.... I wrote the book just like Enoch would have, not knowing too well why I did what but knowing it was right. I think everything in the book is right and I am astounded by it.... First you must accept the fact that the book is written by some one who believes that there was a fall, has been a Resurrection, and will be a judgment. This is what I believe as a Catholic and this is what I imply that Haze could not get away from (though in his terms, not in mine)....

As I see Haze, he most does not want to have been redeemed. He most wants man to be shut of God. 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.... Haze himself is without any specific sin in the catalogue sense. But he has a great sense of sin, because he has been taught to believe in the Redemption. If he hadn't believed in it, he wouldn't have had to reject it so vigorously (the society was not forcing it on him). He walks a mile with rocks in his shoes to make up for looking at the woman in the sideshow coffin. The Redemption creates a debt that has to be paid. (This is a fact to anybody who believes he has been redeemed by Christ.) The Redemption simply changes everything. The fact is that try as he will Haze cannot get rid of his sense of debt and his inner vision of Christ. Mrs. Watts sees this at once. (I never see why when Mrs. Watts saw it nobody else seems to). Even the taxi driver sees it.

From my point of view Haze does not come into his absolute integrity until he blinds himself. While he is preaching the Church Without Christ he is going counter actually to his own wise blood. Haze and Enoch both have *wise blood, which is something that enables you to go in the right direction after what you want*. Enoch's gets him inside an ape suit and Haze's gets him further & further inside himself where one may be supposed to find the answer. When I say he negates his way back to the cross I only mean that complete nihilism has led him the long way (or maybe it's really the short way) around to the Redemption again.... I don't think anything I have said contradicts the feeling of the book which is certainly that human beings do have free choice. I as a Catholic look on H. Motes as the only right kind of man, in his circumstances. If the irony is directed against him, this is because he is the only one in the book who can stand it. My Lord, how could you direct any irony at Enoch? Of course he finds that being an animal is no fun either but this is just funny. It's not full dress irony to my way of thinking. [italics added]

When Haze blinds himself he turns entirely to an inner vision. Now one irony is that where he started out preaching the Church Without Christ he ends up with Christ without a church. A Catholic can't write about a Catholic world because none exists so he has to write about a Protestant one...and I have directed the irony against this Protestant world or against the society that reads the Bible and the Sears Roebuck catalogue wrong, but Haze himself is in it and of it, he is the ultimate Protestant; he transcends it though. It's not either/or, it's both and one through the other.... I don't mean to suggest that Haze is Christ but I believe that everybody, through suffering, takes part in the Redemption, and I believe they suffer most who live closest to all the possibilities of disbelief. Kierkegaard perhaps throws some light on this but I had not read Kierkegaard when I wrote the book.... Conscience is the ultimate sanction.... Haze is here asserting his wise blood in the ultimate way. When he says he does it to pay, he means to pay his part of the debt of Redemption.... I am not really so sanctimonious as I sound. I just unfortunately have Haze's vision and Enoch's disposition. (Letter, 2 March 1954)

H. Motes is such an admirable nihilist. His nihilism leads him back to the fact of his Redemption, however, which is what he would have liked so much to get away from. (Letter, 3 March 1954) I think of Haze Motes as a kind of saint. His overwhelming virtue is integrity. (Letter, 9 July 1955) God's reasonable man, the prototype of whom must be Abraham, [is] willing to sacrifice his son and thereby show that he is in the image of God Who sacrifices His Son. All H. Motes had to sacrifice was his sight...he was a mystic and he did it. (Letter, 10 November 1955) Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood; it's too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people's means of grace—they have no sacraments. (Letter, 13 September 1959)

Wise Blood has reached the age of ten and is still alive. My critical powers are just sufficient to determine this, and I am gratified to be able to say it. The book was written with zest and, if possible, it should be read that way. It is a comic novel about a Christian *malgre lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death. *Wise Blood* was written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations. That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them, 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 novel, can only be asked to deepen. (Head note to *Wise Blood* added in 1962)

The hero's rat-colored automobile is his pulpit and his coffin as well as something he thinks of as a means of escape. He is mistaken in thinking that it is a means of escape, of course, and does not really escape his predicament until the car is destroyed by the patrolman. The car is a kind of death-in-life symbol, as his blindness is a life-in-death symbol. The fact that these meanings are there makes the book significant. The reader may not see them but they have their effect on him nonetheless. This is the way the modern novelist sinks, or hides, his theme. (*Mystery and Manners*, 1969: 72)

Flannery O'Connor