

13 CRITICS DISCUSS

Wise Blood (1952)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

"This is the first novel of a twenty-six-year-old Georgia woman.... An important addition to the grotesque literature of Southern decadence."

John W. Simons
Review of *Wise Blood*
Commonweal (1952)

"When the contemporary literary imagination, in all the anxious sensitivity and honesty of youth, explores the problem of what has happened in the modern world to belief, the result is likely to be bizarre, oblique, tortured, and ambiguous. A deeply tragic sense of the human condition will wear the mask of an irresponsibly sportive nihilism. Compassion will wield a whip. Awareness of the need for grace will vent itself in the evocation of obscenity and violence. So it seems to be in Miss O'Connor's first novel....

Like many first novels, [this is] pretty obviously derivative.... Miss O'Connor has perhaps followed too many and too diverse models for her own salvation. Onto the naturalistic farce of Erskine Caldwell she has grafted the satire of Evelyn Waugh.... Her sharp-eyed and saucy similes and metaphors indicate she may have been reading Raymond Chandler as well as Caldwell. Her allegory is Kafkaesque.... Farce, satire, and allegory are all modes that sacrifice empathy to detachment, that involve radical distortions and simplifications of character, reality, and experience, and that impose on the writer the most rigorous requirements of tonal consistency. It takes the maturest skill to combine their effects into a sustained unity. Miss O'Connor's skill is not yet that mature, although she makes a good run for the money."

Joe Lee Davis
Review of *Wise Blood*
Kenyon Review (1953)

"In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1952), the hero is a young revivalist preacher, founder of the Church Without Christ. The denial of God is his grotesque religious act. Blasphemer, murderer, penitent, and ascetic without a god, he still remains a pinpoint of light in a society that knows only spiritual sloth. Freakish though he may be, the grotesque seeks desperately to express spirit, denying the practicalities of daily life in favor of an outlandish hope. Between the far poles of demonic rebellion and saintly victimization lay the picturesque and the grotesque heroes, who combined elements of the polar attitudes. The picaresque carried the comic aspects of the modern reality to the verge of irony and absurdity; and the grotesque showed that the tragic aspects of that reality were frequently pathetic or incongruous. What all the incarnations of the hero seemed to share was this: an awareness of incongruousness or absurdity."

Ihab Hassan
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1963) 1422-23

"Hazel Motes is on a train at the beginning of *Wise Blood*, Flannery O'Connor's first novel, in the act of leaving his native Eastrod, Tennessee, on his way to Taulkinham. He has decided to reject the traditional Jesus and preach a new 'Church of Christ Without Christ.' He has first to go through the ritual of dislocation before he can fulfill the terms of his prophecy, thus leaving a known area to travel to an unknown one. The prophecy and dislocation end in disaster and death. The same formula may explain Mr. Head's and Nelson's trip to Atlanta in 'The Artificial Nigger'....

Nathanael West and Franz Kafka are the writers most often suggested as inspirations for *Wise Blood*. Hazel Motes, the central figure of the novel, has the crusading zeal of a Miss Lonelyhearts and the blind steadfastness of a Kafka hero; but it is probably unwise to carry the connection further. When he arrives in Taulkinham to preach the gospel of the Church Without Christ he receives his redemption and purification in a way which seems unorthodox: he frequents the bed of a well-known prostitute whose address he found on a lavatory wall. This establishes the tone of the unconventional prophecy and evangelism which runs through the novel. Hazel Motes meets a succession of false religionists and we are intended to measure the sincerity of his convictions against the hypocrisy of theirs.

One of these figures, Asa Hawks, has pretended to blind himself to enhance his career as an itinerant beggar. Another, Hoover Shoats, has made a profitable career of espousing new religions: 'You watch out, friend. I'm going to run you out of business. I can get my own new Jesus and I can get Prophets for peanuts, you hear?' A third, Enoch Emery (blessed with the hereditary faculty of 'wise blood'), steals a shriveled-up mummy from a museum to oblige Hazel Motes with a new Jesus for his religion. Hazel makes his way through this corrupt universe of false prophets to advance the sincere cause of his new cult.

When he realizes that he has failed he blinds himself with quicklime and proceeds to subject himself to every variety of torture (like a latter day Oedipus, as one critic has suggested). In accustomed fashion for Flannery O'Connor's characters, Hazel Motes has had his moments of religious feeling and violence. He has experienced a series of surrealistic horrors and has worked out his destiny in terms of the rigid transplantation-prophecy-return (death) pattern. There is one observer of all this action who supplies the final irony to Hazel Motes' 'achievement.' This is his landlady who represents the common sense of the unenlightened and uninitiated; Flannery O'Connor is fond of giving this type the final say.... Flannery O'Connor allows the landlady herself to complete the caricatured portrait of Bible Belt morality. Hazel Motes and the other oddly named eccentrics in *Wise Blood* seem quite without precedents until one recalls again the Sherwood Anderson of *Winesburg, Ohio*. A possible model for Motes' Church of Christ Without Christ could be Dr. Parcival's strange crucifixion notion: 'Everyone is Christ and we are all crucified.' At least the sense of violence and metaphysical grotesqueness attached to each are vintage fanaticism."

Melvin J. Friedman
"Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction"
English Journal LI
(April 1962) 233-43

"In *Wise Blood* (1952) Hazel Motes, descendant of a line of Fundamentalist preachers, becomes, as a result of his war experiences, the founder of a new religion: 'I preach the Church without Christ'... An anti-saint, as it were, in the end he wears barbed wire next to the skin and blinds himself with quicklime for anti-Jesus' sake. Flannery O'Connor has said of her own work: 'It is literal in the same sense that a child's drawing is literal. When a child draws he doesn't try to be grotesque but to set down exactly what he sees, and as his gaze is direct, he sees the lines that create motion. I am interested in the lines that create spiritual motion.' And this is what she does in this raw, extraordinarily powerful, savagely comic novel of spiritual emptiness through which the God-intoxicated Hazel moves."

Walter Allen
The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States
(Dutton 1965) 308

"In *Wise Blood* she did parody the Existentialist point of view...but the parody was very serious. In this and in most of her later writing she gave to the godless a force proportionate to the force it actually has in episode after episode, as in the world, as in ourselves, it wins. We can all hear our disbelief, picked out of the air we breathe, when Hazel Motes says, 'I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.'

Note the velocity and rightness of these sentences. Many pages and a number of stories by this writer have the same perfection.... I am speaking now of merits achieved in the reader's interest: no unliving words, the realization of character by exquisitely chosen speech and interior speech and behavior, the

action moving at the right speed so that no part of the situation is left out or blurred and the violent thing, though surprising, happens after due preparation, because it has to. Along with her gifts, patient toil and discipline brought about these merits...similar to those of another Christian writer who died recently, T. S. Eliot.... [O'Connor and Eliot] were similarly moved toward serious art, being early and much possessed by death as a reality, a strong spiritual sensation, giving odd clarity to the appearances they saw through or saw beyond. In her case as in his, if anyone at first found the writing startling he could pertinently remind himself how startling it was going to be to lose his own body....

When it comes to seeing the skull beneath the skin, we may remark that the heroes of both O'Connor novels are so perceived within the first few pages, and her published work begins and ends with coffin dreams. Her *memento mori* is no less authentic for being often hilarious, devastating to a secular world and all it cherishes. The O'Connor equivalent for Eliot's drowned Phoenician sailor...is a museum piece, the shrunken corpse that the idiot Enoch Emery in *Wise Blood* proposes as the new humanist Jesus.... Her best stories do the work that Eliot wished his plays to do, raising analogical meaning over literal action. He may have felt this himself, for though he rarely read fiction I am told that a few years before he died he read her stories and exclaimed in admiration at them."

Robert Fitzgerald

Introduction

Everything That Rises Must Converge

(Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1965)

"If the content of *Wise Blood* seems bizarre and ludicrous, the rhetoric only reinforces that appearance. Extremely incongruous images, oxymorons, and synesthesia convince us that here indeed is a strange new world. Objects are like humans and animals, human beings are like animals and insects... But the unconventional rhetoric is not an embellishment pasted upon a basically conventional view of the world. It is indeed a warped world, one which has been likened to a Chagall painting, and the comparison of the novel to the modern painting seems especially apt for Miss O'Connor often appears to share modern painting preoccupations.

Her world frequently is that of a dream (in keeping with her topsy-turvy aesthetic, dreams are perhaps the most lucid and conventional parts of the book), with characters who transpose themselves, with aimless action endlessly performed, with bizarre mixtures of the known and the unfamiliar. Surrealistically, soda fountain chairs are 'brown toad stools,' trees look 'as if they had on ankle-socks,' and a cloud has 'curls and a beard' before it becomes a bird. The physical world partakes of the strangeness which colors characters and action: the sky leaks and growls, the wind slashes around the house, 'making a sound like sharp knives swirling in the air,' and 'the sky was like a piece of thin polished silver with a dark sour-looking sun in one corner of it.'

Miss O'Connor believed that it was her Catholicism which prompted her to describe the world as a bizarre and sinister dream: 'My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable.' She further thought that such a specific vantage point suggested the themes with which she worked: 'I will admit to certain preoccupations that I get, I suppose, because I'm a Catholic; preoccupations with belief and with death and grace and the devil'....

Nearly everyone who has commented on the novel has noticed the malformed characterizations, the complete absurdity of action and event, and other features which depart from convention. Is it not, then, a farfetched story, which the author has attempted to dignify by grafting on a highly unconventional rhetoric? I think not.... The ideal figure, it seems, would be a saint who disbelieved, that is, one who was actively searching for religious meaning (as opposed to the majority who passively accept the traditional view, although they secretly regard it as nonsense) but who did not find it in the established beliefs.... Both believer and disbeliever are 'outsiders,' in that they seriously think about their spiritual life, whereas most people are so immersed in a materialistic life that they neither accept nor reject religion....

Haze Motes at first seems an unlikely St. Anthony figure. But the wide differences in time and place become unimportant when the essentially similar natures of the two men are seen. Both are possessed with

an overpowering sense of the importance of religious belief as the only force which can give order and meaning to their lives. And both use self-abasement to express their realization of the gulf which separates the human from the spiritual. One accepts a saint as a flagellant, but is at first surprised that Haze Motes, the illiterate Tennessean, unconsciously knows of the centuries-old method of chastising the flesh to purify the soul. Once the suggestion is implanted that Haze is to be regarded seriously as a seeker after divine truth, rather than as just another Bible-beating Southerner, the departure from the form is begun. Whereas Anthony had renounced civilization to find God in the desert, it is in the desert that Haze finds his substitute for God; the army 'sent him to another desert and forgot him again. He had all the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there.'

And where Anthony's confrontation with God had left him humble, Haze's false truth goads him into pride; his actions at first betray his contemptuousness of other people, who may believe in the fiction that he has discarded, but soon his words reveal the prideful unbeliever... Haze also departs from the form when he seeks the city; 'God made the country but man made the town' is at least as old as St. Augustine, but for Miss O'Connor, who always conceives of the city as Sodom, such a moral geography is still valid. When Haze reaches the city, his life once again parallels St. Anthony's; according to the legend, St. Anthony was subjected to harassment by all sorts of demons, and the invention of all kinds of demonic forms became the distinguishing characteristic of paintings which used the Temptation as a subject. Haze, too, is bordered on all sides by monsters. With figure of speech, with description, and even with suggestive names—Hawks, Shoats—the author emphasizes that Haze has plunged himself into a chaos filled with every kind of monstrous apparition.

All of the characters have some animalistic aspect to their natures, and all represent some type of worldly threat to Haze's unworldly quest. Hawks is the fake preacher, unable at the moment of truth to act in the name of that which he had preached. Sabbath Lily Hawks is the complete sensualist, who recognizes that Haze is obsessed: 'I knew when I first seen you you were mean and evil....' And Hoover Shoats, who had posed as Onnie Jay Holy, is Haze's special tempter; like the pig which is generally shown in depictions of St. Anthony as a figure symbolic of sensuality and gluttony, the worst threats to his attempts to lead the religious life, Shoats is the particularly twentieth-century, bourgeois threat to Haze's religious vision; he sees the commercial possibilities of Haze's belief and he wants to make a confidence game of it....

Once the tension between the form, St. Anthony, and the departure from it, Haze Motes, has been established, there is little need for its constant emphasis. Rather, the novel is a series of events, or panels of a painting as it were, showing Haze being tormented by the symbolically different weird beasts. The motif is not reintroduced until near the end of the novel, when Haze has been forced to see that there is no escape from Christ. Structurally, of course, it is at this point when the departure from the form becomes the form. For the description of Haze's final, saintlike actions, the point of view is shifted to the eyes of Haze's horsey, lovesick landlady.

After the destruction of his car, of his delusion, Haze returns to blind himself. Thereafter his landlady, mainly because of his large disability check (which is one hundred per cent and suggests that Haze was a mentally exhausted victim of the war), takes great interest in Haze and observes him closely.... When she learns that Haze walks in shoes filled with rocks and broken glass and wears strands of barbed wire wrapped around his chest, she is convinced of his insanity: 'Well, it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit do9ing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats....'

Miss O'Connor was fully conscious that her work lay within a 'school of the grotesque.' She made several remarks about the presence of the grotesque in her art. Though she felt that modern life has made grotesques of us all, still, she thought that too often her work was termed 'grotesquerie' when she had no intention of achieving that response. She justified her use of it as the only mode of illusion through which she could reach her audience. I doubt that she would have attempted a rigid definition for 'grotesque'; she had used the term in too many contexts. I do believe, however, that her purpose in using it can be safely stated: the grotesque for her was a form of religious hyperbole. There is always the danger that an audience not attuned to the form will misunderstand such hyperbole. That is the chance that Miss O'Connor must

have felt she had to take. Certainly she was deadly serious when she used the grotesque, and its use was not merely gratuitous. Just as certainly she was not merely celebrating southern degeneracy.

Flannery O'Connor was, on the contrary, perhaps the writer of the modern Southern school most conscious of the chaotic world caused by the declining belief in older religious institutions. Thus her satire was the most desperate, for to her it was most obvious that the old order was crumbling. But she saw that the old order in religion remained a husk; therefore she had to attack those people who play out their lives within the old form without giving allegiance to it and those people who have gone over more obviously to some other allegiance. There was no place in her world for any norms; from her vantage point the entire world did look grotesque, since her audience did not recognize the normative value of faith."

Lewis A. Lawson

"The Perfect Deformity: *Wise Blood*"

Renascence: Essays on Values in Literature 17.2 (Spring 1965)

"During his term in the army, Haze, disillusioned by the existence of evil in the world, sins for the first time. As a consequence he denies Christ in order to justify his behavior and then continues to sin in order to justify his unbelief. To whoever will listen, and to some who won't, Haze preaches against redemption, insistently and obsessively denying Jesus.... Haze blasphemes, seeking proof and reproof, seeking his own salvation. The novel's irony resides in that no one is willing to save him, that his blasphemy passes virtually unnoticed. In Miss O'Connor's world, a sea of evil, one more iniquitous drop is hardly perceptible. No one will redeem Haze, he must redeem himself; he must transform his life in Christ's image, which means self-crucifixion. It is the only redemptive possibility in a depraved world. At the end, Haze immolates himself, re-enacting, in effect, the redemption of Man.

If God does not exist, Haze decides at the outset of the novel (as Ivan Karamazov had before him), there can be no sin—everything is permissible. In order to demonstrate his position, Haze determinedly sins even—and this is the irony of his behavior—when his nature revolts against the act.... The commission of sin becomes for Haze a kind of ritual declaration of freedom from God the Father's authority. Ironically, the more Haze sins, the more committed he becomes to the import of His judgement. His first conscious act in Taulkinham (the big city) is to visit a prostitute...

For all of Haze's insistence that he believes in nothing, he is unable to act without recriminations of guilt. His sinning is an insistent denial of the God in him and is self-mortifying, pleasurable only in a masochistic sense. No matter what he does to change his appearance, his calling evinces itself; he is unmistakably a preacher. Haunted by unadmitted guilt, Haze is constrained to deny his identity. His denial, because of its very insistence, becomes an affirmation.... Haze can't escape himself or his destiny. As he performs it, even whoring becomes a religious act, a kind of penitential sin. He sins, hoping in his punishment to discover the vengeance and mercy of God.

In his search for salvation, Haze is continually confronted by the disparity between appearance and reality.... Haze is repeatedly confirmed in his anti-Christian course of action, though he knows instinctively that he is wrong. When he meets a blind preacher with his little girl, Haze follows them, bent on his own salvation. That the preacher's name is Hawks and that he is introduced competing for disciples with a salesman hawking potato peelers suggests the essential likeness between the two—the shared corruption. The blind preacher and the girl are not what they seem: the man is neither blind nor a man of God; the girl is not a child but an ugly and parasitic slut. They are both, as Hawks, predatory, selling salvation as if man were as easily shriven as a potato is peeled. While Asa Hawks preaches of Christ without believing in Him, Haze, who profoundly believes, preaches of 'the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified.' However, in a causal sense, the spurious blind man is Haze's spiritual father. The lustful girl, Sabbath Hawks, one of the prize grotesques in Miss O'Connor's gallery of moral deformities, woos Haze by taking advantage of his attraction to her 'father's' ostensible religiosity.... At the last, unable to bear the sight of evil any longer, he fulfills Hawks' forsaken intention—he burns out his own eyes....

Enoch's spiritual rebirth through the 'new Jesus' (a shrunken mummy), his transformation from man into gorilla, is a satiric inversion of the evolutionary process. His redemption is a grotesque joke... Like

Haze's mortification at the end of the novel, Enoch's is an exemplary act, an objectified comment on the spiritual state of his society.... Enoch is a comic figure; Haze, a tragic.... Unable to reach his preacher friend, Enoch delivers the mummy to Sabbath Hawks, who has moved in with Hazel. Before Hazel discovers the 'new Jesus,' the evil girl has learned to dote on it, playing house with it as if it were child of her union with Hazel. In more than one sense, however, the creature does ultimately save Hazel; it gives him his first recognition of objectified evil, and he sees it as the manifest offspring of his sins, mocking him. He also recognizes it as himself—his double. Wearing his mother's glasses, he sees his own image in the mirror as his mother's, when images of Sabbath and the mummy merge into his mirror vision, blurring all distinctions. He hears a voice saying, "Call me Momma now," and is comforted by the screwed-up face of the shrunken creature.

His smashing of the mummy against the wall is his first self-murder; it prophesies and anticipates Hazel's brutal murder of his double, the false preacher, whom Hoover Shoats has hired to impersonate Hazel. In killing his impersonator (Haze's evil self), Haze, in a sense, purges his evil, making possible his rebirth and final redemption. Whereas Enoch, through the 'new Jesus' and through the murder of his alter ego, is reborn into seeming innocence—his redemption a joke on itself, Haze is reborn through his ultimate evil act into self-knowledge and, ironically, innocence, becoming in effect the 'new Jesus' himself, sacrificing himself for his belief in the redemption of Christ....

Enoch, lonely and unloved, envies the zoo animals the comfort and attention they receive.... When the gorilla finally grips his hand, Enoch is disarmed by the creature's warmth and friendship; the gorilla's is the first friendly hand Enoch has grasped since coming to the big city.... Following the dictates of some compulsive primordial urge—Enoch has a mystic faith in the wisdom of his blood—the repulsive boy kills the man in the gorilla and becomes him, reborn in innocence and stardom. In a real sense, Enoch does, as he had dreamed, better his condition. He achieves at last identity and status. The comic ritual of his rebirth is a parody of redemption: 'Burying his clothes was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn't need them anymore.' Enoch is reborn in the image of his creature-god. Yet his change of life is illusory; when as gorilla he approaches a man and woman in the park, rather than admire him and shake his hand as befitting a celebrity, they run from him....

Hazel's killing of his impersonator Solace Layfield parallels Enoch's murder of the gorilla star; they are both, in a sense, self-murders; moreover, both acts are impelled by the influence of the shrunken mummy. As Enoch has been humiliated by the man-gorilla, Haze has been inadvertently mocked by his double, a paid dupe of the spiritual con man Hoover Shoats.... However, Haze kills his double not for mimicking him but for saying that he doesn't believe in Jesus when he really does. That is, Haze runs over the imitation preacher for committing Haze's own heresy. ("You ain't true," Haze said. "You believe in Jesus.") Haze forces his double to strip off his clothes—the clothes of his false life; then Haze runs him down. (Enoch too had stripped off his clothes before entering his new identity.) Before the false prophet (peeled like a potato from the hawker's machine—a recurrent symbolic image) dies, he confesses his sins to Hazel, a captive priest, ministering, in a sense, his own last rites. The confession, which is in effect an objectification of Haze's confusion, is one of the few deeply moving scenes in the novel. This is Haze's first revelation of the horror of his own damned soul, his own unadmitted evil....

His double's confession is the turning point in the novel for Hazel. He is aware for the first time that he has sinned, that he is guilty of fornication, blasphemy, murder, and in implication, suicide. The moment of recognition sets in motion the possibility of his salvation; thereafter Haze moves from guilt to mortification to redemption. As Haze is Solace's unwitting redeemer (he punishes Solace for his sins and hears his confession), Solace's confession makes possible Haze's redemption. Having killed his alter ego and redeemed him into innocence, Haze is prepared to start a new life, though its direction is still unclear to him.

Hazel's decayed car, an old Essex which holds neither oil nor water nor gas, is the symbolic vestment of his corrupt existence. On several occasions in the novel Hazel asserts that the car (a 'good car' he mistakenly believes) is his substitute for Jesus.... Hazel's 'good car' is his home, his pulpit, and his chance to escape to a new city, all in one. His complete confidence in and reliance on the potency of a defective machine is the blind illusion that sustains him in his spiritual deformity. The car is his sanctuary—his

unfailing protector from Judgment. Once the car is destroyed (a policeman pushes it off a cliff, declaring it 'not a car'), Hazel's way of life, his defense against Jesus, is destroyed with it. The destruction of the car leaves Hazel unprotected, face-to-face with the universe he has mocked, alone with the awful recognition of his sins. The vulnerability of his machine womb effects Haze's final disillusion in the Church Without Christ. There is no longer any material impediment preventing his recognition of Jesus. Looking over the embankment at the washed-out red clay and his disemboweled car, Haze has an epiphany; he sees beyond the visage of evil, the ugly veil masking the real world, to the sight of limitless space—a manifestation of the infinite....

Hazel's vision is his first and last. It is, in effect, all inclusive; having seen it, he has nothing left to see. The terrible self-awareness that his sight imposes is, like that of Oedipus, unbearable to him. The car is the vestment of his other life, and with its death, Hazel is reborn. He is able then, as Hawks was not, to burn out his eyes to justify his belief in the Redemption. Moreover, Hazel blinds himself because sight, the continuous recognition of his own evil, is no longer tolerable. As penance for his sins, for all sins, he retains intact his last terrible vision into the valley of hell and beyond, into endless space (the awesome province of God). The classical (and Biblical) irony obtains: when Hazel had eyes he saw not, in blindness he achieves at least spiritual sight. Hazel's blindness is the first in a series of penitential mortifications he inflicts on himself. The only audience to these penances (he does not of course seek any) is his voracious landlady Mrs. Flood, who is in spite of herself finally converted by the example of Hazel's abnegation and penitence—his sainthood. He eats only enough for the barest subsistence; he lines his shoes with broken glass and rocks; he wears barbed wire under his shirt; he exposes himself to cold and illness....

Hazel's mortification and martyrdom unto death is presented through the witness of his predatory landlady, who is jealous of his suffering because she is unable to fathom its purpose. Evil and voracious like most of the characters in Miss O'Connor's world, the landlady is mystified and consequently angered by Hazel's self-punishment; she feels cheated, though she regularly steals his money, because she is unable to possess his motives, to contain in her head the secret of his behavior. When Mrs. Flood spies on Hazel while he is sleeping (she devotes her waking hours to the discovery of his 'secret'), she discovers that he has barbed wire wrapped around his chest....

This is the somewhat shrill thesis of the novel: though the world is encrusted with evil ('A good man is hard to find'), if one man is willing to sacrifice himself in Jesus' image, redemption is still possible. Hazel is the fallen Adam...who achieves at last a greater innocence than that he had lost, journeying into the hell of evil and returning, purged, purified, reborn. In implication, Hazel's is a mythic journey, traversing the three consequential possibilities of man's spiritual condition: Adam, Satan, and Christ. The journey back from hell is inevitably more difficult than the Fall. For all but Hazel, Miss O'Connor suggests, it has become prohibitively difficult. His redemption is therefore intended as exemplary, that is, it makes possible the redemption of the world....

At the end of the novel Hazel accepts the fact of sin and the existential possibility of redemption. Hazel's death passes virtually unnoticed; he is found near-dead in a drainage ditch by two fat policemen, authority representatives of their society, who, out of gratuitous malice, club him into unconsciousness (his crucifixion). The law enforcers deliver Hazel's corpse to Mrs. Flood and she at last has uncontested possession of him. Her verbal fondling of the crucified saint suggests at first the necrophilia of Faulkner's Emily ["A Rose for Emily"]. However, Miss O'Connor's purpose is other: Mrs. Flood's love of the dead man comes not from sexual frustration but from the spiritual-emotional equivalent; it is an act of conversion, an act, in the religious sense, of love. She becomes, like Mary Magdalene, a convert to his example, a disciple to his sacrifice. Since she is representative of her evil world, she experiences illumination for all of us.

When Mrs. Flood looks into his burned-out eye sockets, the eyes blinded as an act of ultimate belief, she discovers his secret. She glimpses beyond the barrier of life to the God in him, which implies, of course, the God in herself. She has, through Hazel, a partial illumination of the eternal... Her insight is revelatory (like Hazel she sees for the first time when her eyes are closed). She envisions Hazel, illuminated by God's light, ascending to Him. In a corrupt world, redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute, irrevocable sacrifice. Hazel, as grotesque saint, becomes the 'new Jesus' he has prophesied."

Jonathan Baumbach
"The Acid of God's Grace"
The Landscape of Nightmare: Studies in the Contemporary American Novel
(New York U 1965) 88-99

"A 22-year-old soldier, Hazel Motes, upon being released from the army because of a wound, makes his way to his home state of Tennessee. There he founds a Church Without Christ, not only in revolt against his grandfather, a preacher, but in opposition to Asa Hawks, a religious charlatan who pretends to be blind. Hazel's follower, Hoover Shoates, who calls himself Onnie Jay Holy, comes to champion a rival prophet by running him down with an auto, Hazel blinds himself, stops preaching, tortures himself, sickens, and dies."

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(1941; Oxford 1983) 840-41

"The setting in which she placed [her characters] was as much a waste land as the one Eliot had envisioned. This scene in the novel was from the beginning, and remained the fragmented and mobile modern world, on the heels of a devastating and disruptive war, in which there had been as many spiritual casualties as any other kind, as many wandering refugees and 'displaced persons' created, and as great a shift in values and mores. Her counterpart of Eliot's sordid London was the debased city of Taulkinham, inhabited by rootless individuals, sleazy, hostile, self-seeking, untrustworthy, cut off from each other and from every source of spiritual, intellectual, or emotional nutriment.

The figure she planned to set against this ground was a young country boy, dragged by the army from his home in Eastrod, Tennessee, in a part of the country that still retained what the author called elsewhere 'a distinctly Old Testament flavor,' and sent halfway around the globe to fight in some corner of the Second World War; then returned, wounded in body and soul, to a broken-down society, his family and home gone and his bearings hopelessly lost. The action was to encompass his journey to 'the city,' and to recount his travail in this new post-war urban moral wilderness, where he still hoped to find the equivalent of his lost community.

Characteristically, she had outlined no precise course of this conflict for her hero, except that he was at first to contend against, and then succumb to, 'modern' ideas and mores, in their various embodiments. The eventual resolution of the situation was still a mystery even to her, except that Hazel would ultimately reject these, but how and in what terms she had no idea, and planned to find out only in the course of the writing itself, once the character had a persona of his own, and a will which he would follow wherever it led until he found his lost Eastrod. Even then, she knew exactly where she believed his true home to be, but she had no idea how she was to bring him there....

She had probably not been entirely comfortable with Eliot's mythic points of reference, or with the figure of Tiresias in the background. These came from lately acquired knowledge, not from things she 'knew' except in abstracts. She seemed to find her own proper, native ground when she re-characterized her hero and re-based him firmly on someone she *did* know and understand and believe in: the biblical, historical figure of St. Paul, fulminating enemy of Christ, who was waylaid on the road to Damascus and briefly blinded before becoming a passionate apostle. Just so is Hazel stopped in his Essex, in preparation for his own witness.

A few faint images from 'The Waste Land' are still to be recognized in the final version of *Wise Blood*. The figure in Eliot's line, 'There is always another walking beside you,' becomes for O'Connor, 'the wild ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of Hazel's mind.' The shadow which, in Eliot, 'strides behind you by day and rises up to meet you in the evening,' is enlarged upon in her description of Hazel's shadow as 'now behind him and now before him and now and then broken up by other people's shadows, but when it was by itself, stretching out behind him, it was a thin, nervous shadow walking backwards,' like Hazel himself.

By the time she had completed the novel, however, she had wisely abandoned most explicit references to the poem, except for one unmistakable echo, when her antic anti-hero Enoch says of the shrunken mummy whose embalmed remains represent all that unspirited mortal man can hope to become after death. 'He was once as tall as you or me.' In Eliot, this refers to the reduction by drowning of the formerly handsome and tall Phoenician sailor. In O'Connor, it seems to hint at a previous and higher definition of man and his destiny than the post-Christian world, and Hazel's 'modern' nihilist philosophy would allow. The dry and shriveled figure is exactly what Hazel would reduce man to; it is his 'new Jesus,' as Enoch has intuited, and as Hazel himself recognizes, with a revulsion that signifies a bad conscience despite his furious, even murderous, defense of his new belief in what he can 'see' for himself.

Even so, she never lost her sense of the power of Eliot's mix of the gross and the transcendent, the sublime vision growing out of, and imposed as a measure on, the vulgarities, visual and audible, of human spiritual and sensible reality in the present-day life.... Most important of all, Hazel himself was remolded from a character in the process of formation, a confused lamb among wolves, into a temperamental zealot who has already made up his mind to reject everything that has formed him in the past—not only his belief in Christ and his sense of objective sin, but the nameless, unplaced guilt instilled in him by his iron-lined mother with her primitively harsh religion, and by his grandfather, a circuit-riding preacher who had for years 'ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger.'

The rebellious young man is determined to lay these ghosts forever and join his contemporaries in the 'free' world of the present.. The tender and timid Hazel Wickers, alias Weaver, of the earlier versions [drafts] now stalks onto the scene as the rude and contemptuous Hazel Motes (the new name suggesting his spiritual blindness) who encounters Mrs. Hitchcock in the Pullman, and at once attacks her with a sneering observation that redefines him at a stroke: "I reckon you think you been redeemed." The first line of essential motion is here drawn, and Hazel comes to life as he never had in the chapters she so rightly discarded. The image of a baffled searcher was in any case less suited to the direct and hard-driving style she was developing, which better conveyed certainty, however wrong-headed, than well-meaning confusion.

If we can find hardly a trace of the early rather sentimental Hazel in his new incarnation, it is equally hard to find anything of this O'Connor in her treatment of the same scene, only a year or two earlier, in 'The Train'.... The people with whom Hazel comes in contact in the city are for the most part utterly indifferent to his new convictions and his preachments on the subject when he founds his auto-mobile-based Church of the Truth Without Jesus Christ Crucified. But this is not because they are Christians. Even those who profess to be are frauds and scoundrels. The novel in its final form is sparsely populated, but every character is clearly conceived and acidly drawn, and each has an active and essential part to play in the working out of Hazel's illumination and destiny. Most of all, however, it is Hazel's own part to assert throughout his dangerous freedom and independence of will and, even as a penitent, to arrogate to himself alone, without benefit of counsel from any more benign authority, the right to indict himself, try himself, convict himself, sentence himself, and carry out the terrible sentence. Ill-tutored, misguided, but passionately sincere, he meets a fate that is severely logical in the light of his nature and the circumstances, historical and personal, that have produced him."

Sally Fitzgerald

Introduction

Three by Flannery O'Connor
(Penguin/Signet 1983) x-xiv

"In the order of things, Mote [Motes] is a mote, a speck, a blemish, or a particle of dust. His given name is ambiguous, male and female, as well as a tree, a nut, a piece of Nature. Within religious parable, Hazel Mote moves well beyond a cartoon character or freak. Even his car, the virtually indestructible Essex, has magical qualities, the steed to his inverted-heroic knight, so that the image of Mote in his Essex is of a centaur. When Mote blinds himself and plays Oedipus, as against the false blinding of Asa Hawks, he is doing no more than working out his heroic motif in a setting of the false and artificial. The characteristic O'Connor theme is there: the individual who burns with passions that cannot find fulfillment, the 'hunger artist,' as it were, who is dying intensely while audiences seek cheap thrills.

Her character, here as elsewhere, is the creature who pours oil on himself and sets himself on fire, while people ride by unconcerned or else take photographs for sale to tourists. Hazel's double is the Prophet, the man who tries to eke out a few pennies by fortune-telling, turning Mote's deepest feelings into salable items. When Mote kills him, he tries to kill off all 'reproductions' of the truth; the truth may kill and the artificial may save, but in Mote's inverted idealism, he insists on the reality of sin, not on the saving qualities of redemption. Grace, perhaps, is all....

Mote resembles the grim visage of Calvin himself. His sense of sin, however, is gripped by wit. His pleasure is in seeking antipleasure.... The blind man's child is so homely he assumes she is innocent. But the blind man is not blind, and she, in turn, with the Hawthornian name of Sabbath Lily, seduces Mote, who is the innocent one.... The combat in her first novel is a religious one, between those who easily accept Jesus as the redeemer and those, like Hazel Mote, who sense that sin lies outside of what can be redeemed, that the Church of Jesus must be without Jesus. There is a small third group, those who run a confidence game within the interstices of sin and redemption, like Hoover Shoates and the Prophet in his pay. Within this sense of things, O'Connor has enclosed an entire world, in which Manichean elements clash, leaving little other ground.

One who attempts to achieve other ground is the extraordinary Enoch Emery, a zoo worker, a voyeur, a man who desires human contact. His career is completely within the world, but an artificial one. A worker with animals, he seeks an apeskin so that he can become the 'ape' who shakes the hand of people at events and sideshows. He 'experiences' women by way of a hidden area from which he can observe them swimming and sunning themselves.... He approaches history of sorts by stealing from the museum a three-foot mummy, which represents, in his absence of real belief, a kind of totem he needs to fulfill himself. Emery, if we can even define him, is patterned on what does not exist for Hazel. If Hazel is the intense negative of commitment, Emery is the intense positive of social artificiality. He tries to be saved by way of an apeskin, a mummy, compensatory sexual experience; his world is based on artifice which can never achieve belief. Mote's is founded on a negative of belief which is itself a form of devotion.

Like West in *Miss Lonelyhearts*, O'Connor celebrates oddities as forms of contemporary worship. Emery's 'wise blood'—a means to salvation without sacraments—does not lead to any advantage at work or personally, but to indulgence in bewildering acts he cannot himself comprehend. Although cults and fanaticism in a larger sense had not as yet become public matters, we can see, through O'Connor's work, their potentiality for the 1960s and 1970s. By extrapolating from her own religious commitment, she could see both the positive and the negative, chiefly the intensity with which anything can be held. Mote's blinding of himself, the putting out of the speck in the eyes of the Lord, is an act of belief. Asa Hawks's false blindness serves as warning to Mote of what he must avoid, or else he falls, in his view, into the worship of idols."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 230-31

"Flannery O'Connor's irony, her comic impulse, and her involvement with modern philosophy is never clearer than in *Wise Blood*, her first novel. This novel was met for the most part with criticism narrowing the lines of response to its theological implications. And yet in the novel we find a complex and subtle satire of the nihilist, the existentialist, the modern materialist who aims to use religion for profit, as well as the born-again Southern Protestant alienated from his community because of his idiosyncratic or destructive methods of affirming his faith.

We find in this novel some of the most comic moments in O'Connor's art and some of the most grotesque—especially when considering the allusions to infanticide, self-blinding with lye as an affirmation of faith, and murder. One of the more comic incidents demonstrates the central issue in the novel—that of adjusting to modern life. Sabbath Lily, the preacher's daughter, writes the newspaper for advice about whether she should 'neck or not' because she is 'a bastard and a bastard shall not enter the kingdom of heaven' anyway. She is not satisfied with the response to her letter: 'your real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to reexamine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper perspective

and don't let it warp you.' Sabbath Lily replies: "What I really want to know is should I go the whole hog or not? That's my real problem. I'm adjusted okay to the modern world.'

None of O'Connor's characters are adjusted to the modern world, but every possible method of achieving some kind of adjustment is explored—from promoting the Church Without Christ to murdering those who represent a more vulnerable aspect of the self in order to affirm power over death. Hazel Motes, The Misfit of *Wise Blood*, tries both of these methods to 'adjust,' among others. We tend to focus on his grotesque attempts to adjust rather than on the gestures of love found in the novel, gestures that might have succeeded. Enoch and Mrs. Flood try to befriend this perverse 'hero,' but he rebuffs everyone. While Hazel's rebellion against the Southern Protestantism that alienates him from his community is satirized in this novel, his nihilism does not help his 'adjustment.'

This novel was, in fact, one of the first works that critics and readers tried to understand, but it might have been better understood after first reading the stories. The stories more readily develop our appreciation for O'Connor's comic impulse and clearly express her focus on the importance of community and on the simple gestures of love that might finally help us to adjust to the modern world. Hazel's alienation from his community and inability to love results in psychic fragmentation. Mrs. Flood sees in his eyes at the end a mere 'pinpoint of light'—his humanity nearly snuffed out."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 109-10

"*Wise Blood* came out in 1952, when O'Connor was just twenty-seven years old. The germ of the novel had been published as a short story in the *Sewanee Review* some months earlier, but otherwise nothings quite like it had ever appeared in American literature, and critics scarcely knew what to make of it. Some dismissed the work out of hand as a belated example of Southern Gothic. Others declared it a satire on popular evangelical religion in the South. Still others called it black humor at its bleakest. What saved *Wise Blood*, and with it O'Connor's budding career, was the powerful vitality of the work that for most readers quickly manifested itself and thereafter would not be denied even though some of those reading as religionists protested the implications of her narrative and others as lovers of form descried flaws in its structure and technique.

The theme of the novel was the human race's perennial thirst for truth, which for O'Connor was Christ, God incarnate, and fallen mankind's only hope for redemption. More than once she would declare that her primary objective in writing was to proclaim that truth, her talent being merely a divine gift to further that end. Actually no one ever studied technique more assiduously than Flannery O'Connor, and no one worked harder at her craft than she or was more receptive to advice and direction from the acknowledged masters who from time to time advised her (among them Caroline and Allen Tate). Truth as she understood it, however, came first, and the truth she believed in was that embodied in the Catholic Church, to which she gave complete assent and obedience.

Fortunately for her literary pretensions, public acknowledgments of religious faith during the conservative fifties had creased to be anathema. With T. S. Eliot's announcement of his conversion in 1928, a change in attitude among the literati had begun to be noticeable, and by the end of World War II the company of public professing Christians included such figures as W. H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Allen Tate, and Katherine Anne Porter. By 1950 C.S. Lewis and Thomas Merton had achieved the statues of popular apologists with many followers, especially among the young. Thus, almost as soon as *Wise Blood* came out, Flannery O'Connor began to assume willy-nilly the status of a cult figure.

She later described her hero in the novel, a recently discharged veteran from East Tennessee, Hazel Motes, who like O'Connor herself felt a compulsion to proclaim truth, as 'a Christian *malgre lui*.' Motes, however, was shrewd enough to recognize that the versions of Christianity's ancient paradoxes and moral code that had come to him by way of his semiliterate elders and preachers were hopelessly flawed with inconsistencies and improbabilities; consequently he set out to prove the irrelevance of both and to proclaim a religion without Christ.

His trouble, according to the novel, was that a longing for the Christ he had never known lurked in his subconscious and would not let him rest. Thus, blind to the truth he passionately desired he stumbled into one sin after another until eventually, in desperation trying to find the light that the world could not provide, he literally blinded himself, never realizing that by virtue of his quest he had himself become the light he was seeking. O'Connor in a headnote to a later edition attributed Motes's salvation, or 'integrity' as she called it, to his inability 'to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind,' but she acknowledged that this bizarre figure represented a mystery which a comic novel like hers could only be expected to deepen."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 150-51

Michael Hollister (2014)