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The Word according to Flannery O'Connor

EAMON MAHER

IN HER relatively short life (1925-1964), one that was greatly curtailed as a result of being diagnosed with lupus (a disease from which her father also died in 1952), Flannery O'Connor managed to leave behind a literary legacy that continues to fascinate scholars and general readers alike. This is all the more surprising when one considers that the work consists of just two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952)¹ and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), along with 31 short stories.²

Then there is the slightly paradoxical situation whereby someone who is hailed as being a great 'Catholic' writer has almost no Catholic characters in her fiction, which is situated for the most part in the Protestant American South, sometimes referred to as the Bible Belt. Her fictional creations are, generally speaking, obsessed with the idea of salvation and constantly seek signs that they may be among the elect that God chooses to be saved. O'Connor, having spent all but a few years of her life in Georgia, knew more Protestants than she did Catholics; and she excelled at drawing portraits of prophets and false prophets, people who never cease quoting (or misquoting) the Bible, in what are often meditations and reappraisals of the Incarnation: 'In the beginning

1. The version of this novel that I will be using is *Wise Blood* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), with an Introduction by V.S. Pritchett. In-text page numbers will be supplied in brackets.
2. Flannery O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, with an Introduction by V. S. Pritchett (London: Faber and Faber, 1990).

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was the Word ... and the Word was made flesh.' (Jn 1:1,14) In their attempts to come closer to the person of God-made-man, Catholics have recourse to the sacraments, whereas certain Protestant groupings tend to concentrate more on the Bible, which for them is the source of all meaning.

BOTH NATIVE AND ALIEN

In this article I am going to examine how biblical references proliferate in *Wise Blood*, probably the best-known of O'Connor's works, and two short stories, all of which reveal a desire on the author's part to shock readers and awaken them to some of the key tenets of Christianity. We will see that in a literary universe that seems diabolical and gruesome, the action of grace can nevertheless be glimpsed in a manner that betrays what I would describe as a 'Catholic sensibility'. What will also become apparent, I hope, is the author's predilection for rewriting or 'reversing' the Gospel stories in order to give them new meaning. In an interesting meditation on her role as a writer who also happened to be a Catholic living in a largely Protestant milieu, O'Connor observed:

What the Southern Catholic writer is apt to find, when he descends within his imagination, is not Catholic life but the life of this region in which he is both native and alien. He discovers that the imagination is not free, but bound.³

O'Connor knew that by writing about people who were not Catholic, she would experience the type of freedom and objectivity that may well not have been possible had she portrayed members of her own religious grouping.⁴ In *Wise Blood*, she traces the spiritual trajectory of Hazel Motes (mostly referred to as Haze), who came from a strict Protestant evangelical background and who decided at a certain point in his life that he would steer clear of religion. As a young boy, Motes had accompanied his grandfather, a preacher, to various ven-

3. Flannery O'Connor, 'Catholic Novelists and their Readers', *Mystery and Manners*, essays selected and edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), p. 197.

4. She wrote in an article titled 'The Church and the Fiction Writer': 'When people told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have to reply ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist.' *Mystery and Manners*, p. 146.

ues around the country. On one occasion, during a visit to a carnival, Haze got to see an exhibit of a naked woman lying in a coffin. Sensing instinctively that he had done something wrong on his return home, his mother administered a beating and the boy did his own penance by putting stones in his shoes and walking for miles in huge discomfort. As an adult, his doubts about religion increased, particularly as a result of his experience of fighting in World War II. By the time he arrives in Taulkinham, a fictitious town in the American South, he feels as though he is a complete unbeliever.

'DO I NEED JESUS?'

And yet his ire is provoked when he comes across a blind preacher, Asa Hawks, the founder of the Church of Christ, whom Haze suspects of being a fraud. He follows Hawks and his daughter Sabbath and discovers that the man is not blind at all and does not believe in what he preaches. Hawks recognises that there is a lingering faith within Haze: 'Listen boy', he (Hawks) says. 'You can't run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact.' (*Wise Blood*, p. 33) Shortly after comes the retort: 'I don't need Jesus', Haze says. 'What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts.' (*Wise Blood*, p. 37) The lady to whom he refers is a prostitute he visited the night before in an act of defiance to God.

Haze, through no effort on his part, becomes the object of Sabbath's passion. The young woman fails to comprehend that it is not sex that Haze is looking for, more an opportunity to free himself from the shackles of religion. On one particular occasion he announces to Hawks:

'Well, I preach the Church without Christ. I'm member and preacher to that church where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way. Ask me about that church and I'll tell you that it's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption.' (*Wise Blood*, p. 70)

There is a vehemence in these lines that betrays lingering doubts with regard to Haze's alleged lack of faith. Note how everything is inverted: in this new church, the sick will not be cured, nor the dead brought back to life. Hawks's

feigned blindness and Haze's subsequent self-inflicted blindness are a play on the oft-used quote: 'There's none so blind as those that will not see.' Haze is incapable of 'seeing' into his own heart and soul and thus his rejection of false prophets is a manifestation of a deep inner malaise. The main purpose of his new church will be different from anything that has gone before: 'I'm going to preach that there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgement because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar.' (*Wise Blood*, pp. 70-71) His uncontrolled fury leads Haze to a place where his despair has no other outlet apart from violence.

A boy, Enoch Emery, a former inmate of the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy, becomes obsessed in his turn with Haze, but all his attempts at forming a friendship are rebuffed. It dawns on him that Haze has not rid himself of his religious upbringing: 'You ain't got no woman nor nothing to do. I knew when I first seen you that you didn't have nobody nor nothing but Jesus.' For all Haze's railing against Jesus and his false prophets, Enoch's perspicacious comment underlines how Jesus remains his ultimate preoccupation. Haze's striking of Enoch with a stone, his repudiation of Sabbath who, after many failed attempts, finally succeeds in seducing him,⁵ his murder of Solace Layfield, another false preacher, underline the redemptive power of violence among prophetic figures, something which one often encounters in the Bible. This may also explain how Haze manages to attract so many 'followers' in spite of his spiteful character and ineptitude when it comes to human relationships.

PENANCE AND PRAYER

After the episode with Layfield, Haze is himself a victim of violence as he makes his way out of Taulkinham and is stopped by a trooper who pushes his car off an embankment. Completely disenchanted with the world and the people in it

5. Sabbath senses Haze's weakness when it comes to matters of the flesh: 'That innocent look don't hide a thing, he's just pure filthy right down to the guts, like me. The only difference is that I like being that way and I can teach you how to like it. Don't you want to learn how to like it?' (*Wise Blood*, p. 116) There are scarcely any examples of fulfilling sexual encounters in O'Connor's work, which has a strong Jansenist tinge to it.

(first and foremost himself), he decides to blind himself by putting lime in his eyes and then moves into digs with Mrs Flood, a widow who asks him why he walks around with his shoes filled with gravel and glass, to which he responds: 'To pay.' (*Wise Blood*, p. 153) By doing penance, by withdrawing from the world to concentrate on matters of a spiritual nature, Haze recalls the prophets one encounters in the Bible who chose to spend their time in the desert to 'pay' for or expiate their sins. Haze admits that he sees himself as being 'unclean', which prompts the landlady to remark: 'You must believe in Jesus or you wouldn't do these foolish things. ... I wouldn't be surprised if you weren't some kind of an agent for the pope or got some connection with something funny' (*Wise Blood*, p. 155).

Partly with a view to securing his army pension for herself and partly out of a fascination with his *persona*, Mrs Flood proposes marriage to Haze, who in a panic rushes out of the house in atrocious weather conditions. The police find him in a ditch and one of them batters him with a billy club, after which he dies in the back of the police car. Mrs Flood, on seeing his corpse, 'felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light.' (*Wise Blood*, p. 160) The light here does not necessarily indicate a moment of grace, but it appears as though some transformation has taken hold of Haze and that he might, in fact, be saved.

The biblical references already mentioned, to which one could add the description of the cloud that follows Haze when he is driving his new car, a possible adaptation of the Old Testament text when God took the form of a cloud while he was following the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert, reinforce the notion that salvation is not merely confined to the righteous and that even sinners like Hazel Mote can be saved. In a letter to Ben Griffith, O'Connor asserted

that no one but a Catholic could have written *Wise Blood* even though it is a book about a kind of Protestant saint. It reduces Protestantism to the twin absurdities of The Church Without Christ or The Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, which no pious Protestant would do. And of

course no unbeliever or agnostic could have written it because it is entirely Redemption-centered in thought.⁶

The indication given in these lines is that Haze Motes might well be a saint, which is not at variance with many Gospel references to sinners having a special place in God's heart, or the Catholic theology of grace (so brilliantly portrayed in the work of Georges Bernanos and Graham Greene), is consistent with the notion of redemption being possible because of the Incarnation. Haze does not feel 'unclean' because of any specific sin he has committed, but rather because of the stain of Original Sin itself. 'Wise blood' is a synonym for grace in O'Connor's novel, a grace that is open to people of all religions, and none.

THE RICH YOUNG MAN

Similar themes are worked out in O'Connor's short stories. 'A Good Man is Hard to Find' describes a family's chance and fatal meeting with a dangerous criminal, The Misfit, and his gang, when they crash while going down a dirt lane that the grandmother mistakenly thought would lead to an elegant Southern residence.

The story is a re-working of the parable of the rich young ruler whom Jesus encountered (Mt 19:16-30), with the hypocritical grandmother playing the role of the wealthy ruler, in that she tries at all costs to hold on to her material possessions and to her grasp on life. The Misfit shows no pity to the family, especially when the old woman foolishly declares that she recognises him and then pleads for clemency: 'I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood. I know you must come from nice people.' (*Complete Stories*, p. 127) The Misfit does not buy into any of this nature and nurture nonsense. Because of his evil nature, he knows that even if he had not pursued a life of crime, he was destined to remain on the margins: 'You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.' (*Com-*

6. Cited by Brian Wilkie, 'Flannery O'Connor', in Mary R. Reichardt (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Catholic Literature*, Volume 2 (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. 525.

plete Stories, pp. 130-131)

Having heard the shots ring out in the forest where the Misfit's men have taken her son and grandchildren, the old woman is given a different interpretation of the parable:

'Jesus was the only one that ever raised the dead. ... and He shouldn't have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him.' (*Complete Stories*, p. 132)

One can see the way Jesus' words are twisted to suit the Misfit's situation. He, like Haze, finds the message of the Bible too paradoxical, one that requires a faith that he does not possess. So, he states that one thing is as good as another in terms of a person's acts. One can forego all material possessions and pleasures on this earth in order to follow Jesus, in the hope that eternal salvation will be the reward. He, on the other hand, decides that he should try and make the most of life, harm and murder those who get in his way, and not be fearful of the consequences. Jesus told the rich man to sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor and follow him, something the young man was not prepared to do, because money meant more to him than anything else. The Misfit cannot be sure that the parable reflects the words of Jesus and so he chooses to go his own way. He shoots the old lady without a scintilla of regret and then departs the scene.

THE BURNING BUSH

'Parker's Back' relates the story O.E. Parker, a tattoo-loving former sailor in a loveless marriage to a religious fanatic, Sarah Ruth. Parker finds work as a farm labourer and one day as he is bailing hay he is propelled into the air when the tractor he is driving crashes into a tree. A scene of biblical proportions then meets his eye: the tree bursts into flames, 'eaten by the fire'. The passage contin-

ues: 'He could feel the hot breath of the burning tree on his face. He scrambled backwards, still sitting, his eyes cavernous, and if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it.' ('Parkers Back', *Collected Stories*, p. 520) There are obvious parallels between this incident and Moses's encounter with God who assumes the form of a burning bush (Ex 3:1-6). It is noticeable that some of O'Connor's most irreligious characters are beneficiaries of intense moments such as these, which change the course of their lives.

Parker, still in shock, decides he wants a tattoo of God emblazoned on his back, something he believes will appeal to Sarah Ruth. When the artist asks Parker if he has found religion, or has been saved, believing this must be the reason for his strange choice, Parker replies: 'Nah ... I ain't got no use for none of that. A man can't save himself from whatever it is he don't deserve none of my sympathy.' (*Complete Stories*, pp. 524-5) He is doing it because he is married to a woman who is saved and she is expecting their child. He is convinced that the image of God on his back will show her that he understands her fascination with religion.

Things do not work out quite as planned, however. Parker finds the door of his house locked when he arrives home at the same time as 'a tree of light burst over the skyline', which may well be a presage of something bad that is about to happen. Sarah Ruth is horrified when he shows her the image, saying that no man has ever seen the face of God and that the tattoo is simply a form of idolatry. The story ends in the following manner: 'There he was – who called himself Obadiah Elihue – leaning against the tree, crying like a baby.' (*Complete Stories*, p. 530) The letters OE before his surname stand for Obadiah Elihue, the former being the protector of God's prophets (1 Kgs 18:3-18) and the latter, the person who many consider to have been the author of the Book of Job, which narrates Job's sinful reaction to what he considers his undeserved suffering and that leads him to question the justice of God's ways.

Thus the narrative is yet another re-presentation of a biblical story, wherein Parker's unhappiness with his lot, his incapacity to understand his wife's faith, lead to his ostracization and banishment.

THE KNOWN WORLD

Flannery O'Connor, like all good writers, situated her fictions in the world that she knew best, that of the Southern states of America. By her doing so, it was both logical and inevitable that the Bible would feature as prominently as it does. We have seen how she cleverly employs biblical allusions and deliberate rewritings of parables and stories in order to create a fictional world with a universal resonance. I think it is fair to say that she achieved what she stated was one of her primary aims, namely, not to falsify real life and to present characters whose religious insights occasionally transcend the written word:

When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in a concrete, observable reality.⁷

The Word according to O'Connor is very much part of the world in which we live. It is better that it should be thus from an artistic point of view.

7. Flannery O'Connor, 'The Church and the Fiction Writer', *Mystery and Manners*, pp. 148-149.

Baptised to be priests – *The words of liturgical historian Aidan Kavanagh came to me: 'We baptize to the priesthood.' No, we certainly do not yet understand this truth... The whole Church is, in a word, priestly. One becomes a Christian – another Christ – so as to bear Christ's light and life to others and, ultimately, to offer the whole world back to God in the Eucharist, transformed by faith, hope, and love. This is what St Augustine meant when he explained to the newly baptized that the Eucharist on the altar is their own mystery, and why he said, 'We call everyone priests because all are members of only one priesthood.'*

Rita Ferrone, 'Baptismal Ecclesiology and Vatican II', Commonweal, April 12, 2023