

“THE TOTAL MOSIAC”: THE RECEPTION AND
REPUTATION OF FLANNERY O’CONNOR

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ABSTRACT

“The Total Mosaic”: The Reception and Reputation of Flannery O’Connor

Doctor of Philosophy Dissertation by

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My research examines some ways in which various audiences have contributed pieces to what Robert Giroux called the “total mosaic” of Flannery O’Connor’s reputation. Beginning with the 1952 publication of *Wise Blood*, I examine O’Connor’s critical reception among readers whose assumptions about the South and Catholicism informed (and misinformed) their initial response to an author who defied easy categorizing. O’Connor’s thematic concerns and artistic performance provoked great critical unease, an unease evidenced by what critics decided to emphasize about her art. Drawing on the work of Peter J. Rabinowitz, I describe the two general audiences—one “genuine” and the other “ironic”—that shaped O’Connor’s reputation. However, I also examine the effects of people such as Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, who helped to foster some parts of O’Connor’s reputation that readers now take for granted. Further, I examine the ways in which adaptations of O’Connor’s work for stage and screen—especially John Huston’s *Wise Blood*—influence and reflect the course of O’Connor’s reputation and her increased acceptance as an outsider entering the mainstream of American letters. My study closes with an inventory and analysis of how O’Connor is seen by over 4,000 reviewers on Goodreads.com, as a way to gage O’Connor’s current reputation reflected in the reviews of common readers.

My study ultimately suggests that O'Connor's status has, of course, something to do with her subject matter, but is also a function of how she has been presented to the public by reviewers, editors, publishers, filmmakers, and thousands of readers who post their opinions online. I examine the contingencies of literary reputation and identify the moments in which a reputation was created. This is a work of book history; my aim is not to explicate O'Connor's work but to examine the ways in which it has been edited, marketed, read, and received. Drawing extensively on hundreds of reviews and the Farrar, Straus and Giroux Archives, my book tells the story of the understanding and misunderstanding, the reading and misreading, the attacks and eventual canonization of Flannery O'Connor.

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INTRODUCTION

When, in 2012, Fantagraphics Books published *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons*, a collection of linoleum cuts and uncollected cartoons she made mostly while a high-school and college student, the long-established weight of O'Connor's name ensured that the book would be reviewed both widely and well. Most of the reviewers peppered their responses with familiar phrases or what John Rodden calls "watchwords": repeated descriptions that "characterize a figure's radiance and suggest a program of action toward him."¹ Thus, reviewers of *The Cartoons* repeatedly described them as "grotesques,"² O'Connor's sense of humor as "darkly funny,"³ "deft,"⁴ and "acidic,"⁵ and her work as the epitome of "Southern Gothic,"⁶ a phrase which many reviewers, eager to characterize O'Connor's output, often used as if it were a definitive quality rather than a vague description. All of these phrases serve as critical, and often reductive, shorthand. Readers with more than a casual interest in O'Connor know that such terms only reveal small aspects of her artistic performance. O'Connor knew this as well: she admitted that she found herself often unable to read her work in public without laughing aloud

¹ John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St. George' Orwell* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 87.

² Stephen Maine, "Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons," <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/books/flannery-oconnor-the-cartoons> (accessed October 13, 2012).

³ Glen Weldon, "Cartoons of the Artist as a Young Woman," *NPR Books*, July 19, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/07/19/156506520/cartoons-of-the-artist-as-a-young-woman> (accessed October 21, 2012).

⁴ Vanna Le, "Best-Kept Secret: Flannery O'Connor, the Cartoonist," *Forbes*, July 13, 2011, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/booked/2011/07/13/best-kept-secret-flannery-oconnor-the-cartoonist> (accessed October 1, 2012).

⁵ Owen Heitman, "Writer Flannery O'Connor's even shorter career as a cartoonist," *The Australian*, August 18, 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/flannery-oconnors-even-shorter-career/story-fn9n8gph-1226451874246> (accessed September 21, 2012).

⁶ Casey Burchby, "How Flannery O'Connor's Early Cartoons Influenced Her Later Writing," *Publisher's Weekly*, April 9, 2012, <http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/comics/article/51455-how-flannery-oconnor-s-early-cartoons-influenced-her-later-writing.html> (accessed September 21, 2012).

and once dropped her copy of “Good Country People” during a reading because she was laughing so hard.⁷ Such is not the way one might expect the author of dark or acidic works to behave. And when she learned that a friend had secured a professorship teaching “Southern literature,” she asked him, “What is that?”⁸ One would not expect such a question, however ironic, from an author so often linked with the South in the minds of so many readers. As Rodden shows throughout his study of Orwell, watchwords are means by which a writer’s image and reputation are fostered over time. By watching the watchwords, one can trace the history of a writer’s critical reception and literary identity.

The most trenchant observation on *The Cartoons* came not from highbrow sources such as *NPR’s Books Blog* or the *Guardian UK*, but from Daniel Elkin in *Comics Bulletin*. After quoting other reviewers, who characterized the cartoons as valuable in their early revelation of O’Connor’s “perspective of the outsider”⁹ or as revealing her early ability to depict “the emotionally fraught relationships between individuals and the institutions that both guide and constrict them,”¹⁰ Elkin argued that, in the case of O’Connor’s cartoons, the Emperor had no clothes:

These reviewers sound like they know what they are talking about. They are able to unearth rather obtuse intellectual understandings from these linoleum prints and crash those concepts into nicely constructed sentences. And it all sounds like it means something, doesn't it? But would they have done so in the absence of the context? Had these very cartoons been done by my grandmother for the *Elmont Gazette* and found in an old box in the attic, would these reviewers still wax so

⁷ Jean W. Cash, *Flannery O’Connor: A Life* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 184-85.

⁸ Flannery O’Connor to Thomas Gossett, 24 November 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 255.

⁹ Peter Wild, “A fresh look at Flannery O’Connor,” *The Guardian Books Blog*, July 5, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2011/jul/05/fresh-look-flannery-o-connor-cartoons> (accessed October 11, 2012).

¹⁰ Maine, “*Flannery O’Connor: The Cartoons*,” <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/books/flannery-oconnor-the-cartoons> (accessed October 13, 2012).

intellectually? Is it the work itself here that is being reviewed, or is it the context?¹¹

Elkin's question is worth considering because it raises the issue of how a present literary reputation affects judgments of past work. What is past may be prologue, but the present affects our assumptions about the past. When thinking about *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, many modern readers automatically regard the novel as a controversial one that raises troubling issues regarding race—but Twain's original audience worried much more about what they saw as Twain's celebration of juvenile delinquency.¹² A modern reader may be similarly surprised to learn that the original reviewers of *Benito Cereno* did not regard Melville's novella as a treatise on the slave trade: as James Machor explains, "Melville had simply never been read as a writer dealing with political issues, at least not such a highly contentious, national one such as slavery."¹³ The reviews of *The Cartoons* suggest that new aspects of writers' continually evolving reputations change the ways in which their past work is regarded—even when, as in this case, that past work seems more of a juvenile curiosity than a prefiguring of later triumphs.

In his essay "Kafka and His Precursors," Jorge Luis Borges shows how, in some texts predating Kafka's, we detect Kafka's "idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist."¹⁴ Because of Kafka, Borges argues, we read works by Browning and Kierkegaard differently.

¹¹ Daniel Elkin, review of *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons*, by Flannery O'Connor, *Comics Bulletin*, <http://www.comicsbulletin.com/reviews/4479/review-flannery-oconnor-the-cartoons> (accessed October 13, 2012).

¹² See Peter Messent's examination of this idea in *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12-14.

¹³ James L. Machor, "The American Reception of Melville's Short Fiction in the 1850s" in *New Directions in American Reception Study*, ed. Philip Goldstein and James L. Machor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.

¹⁴ Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka and His Precursors," *Labyrinths* (New York: New Directions, 1988), 200.

Borges's conclusion—that “every writer *creates* his own precursors”¹⁵—is demonstrated by many reviewers' reactions to O'Connor's cartoons and is the source of Elkins's puzzlement in the above passage. Kelly Gerald's fine essay that accompanies the published cartoons sheds light on their context so that a reader understands all of the local jokes about WAVES invading the campus of the Georgia State College for Women, but Gerald also strains to justify the existence of the collection by arguing that O'Connor's “background in the visual arts” led to the “highly visual quality of her prose.”¹⁶ Such a claim seems analogous to finding that Shakespeare played the lute and then explaining how such a discovery sheds light on the musical qualities of his verse. Once an author's style, content, and favorite issues—all of which help create his or her reputation—have been agreed upon, anything from his or her previous life can be read as evidence for the dominant critical opinion. What O'Connor's readers have singled out as worthy of their attention—what Peter J. Rabinowitz calls “rules of notice”—and how what has been noticed has changed over time is one subject of this study.

The publication and effusive reception of *The Cartoons* reveals the desire of various figures in the literary marketplace to keep O'Connor's name in print and keep her name alive for new generations of readers. Her place in the canon seems currently stable: a look at the number of articles listed in the MLA Bibliography since her first publication in 1952 shows a consistent level of academic interest:

Table 1: Number of scholarly articles about O'Connor listed in the *MLA Bibliography*, 1952-2013

Years	Number of Articles
1952-1959	7
1960-1969	121
1970-1979	278

¹⁵ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ Kelly Gerald, “The Habit of Art” in *Flannery O'Connor: The Cartoons* (Seattle: Fantagraphics Books, 2012), 99.

1980-1989	369
1990-1999	338
2000-2009	325
2010-2012	104

Source: MLA International Bibliography (accessed September 21, 2013)

O'Connor's childhood home in Savannah and her later home, Andalusia, are both tourist attractions, the collections of her letters and manuscripts are major archives for students of American literature, journals such as *The Sewanee Review* and *Shenandoah* proudly list O'Connor as one of their notable contributors, the University of Georgia Press has sponsored a fiction award in O'Connor's name since 1983, and the University of Iowa and Georgia College and State University have celebrated O'Connor as among their most notable alumni. One can purchase bumper stickers bearing some of her remarks ("When in Rome, do as you did in Milledgeville"), wear T-shirts with her likeness or quotations such as, "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you odd," or read about her effect on the songs of Bruce Springsteen.¹⁷ Readers today may find nothing surprising about her place in the Library of America, on university syllabi, or in anthologies of American fiction. O'Connor is so widely-known now it is hard to imagine that her success was not a *fait accompli*.

Yet many reviewers, like the original readers of *Huckleberry Finn*, failed to recognize what now seems obvious about her work to her many admirers. But these original reviewers were neither myopic nor unsophisticated; rather, they were faced with the work of an author who defied easy categorization. In his examination of the critical reception of *The Catcher in the Rye*, Richard Ohmann observes that many of the novel's original reviewers seemed blind to what now seems obvious: part of Holden's rage against "phonies" is the result of the class prejudice

¹⁷ The gift shop at Andalusia sells many O'Connor products; the Café Press website sells O'Connor T-shirts, and Springsteen has referenced O'Connor in many interviews, such as those cited in David Burke's *Heart of Darkness: Bruce Springsteen's Nebraska* (London: Cherry Red Books, 2011).

he detests and his disillusionment with the values of capitalism. Ohmann notes that the original reviewers universalized the source of Holden's angst and sought to “displace the political emotion that is an important part of Salinger’s novel.”¹⁸ He further argues that the first wave of critics ignored all of the novel’s attacks on class and capitalism because they themselves were part of what was being criticized: “It seems natural,” Ohmann states, “for a critical establishment so located in U.S. capitalism to interpret and judge literary works in a way harmonious with the continuance of capitalism.”¹⁹ Salinger’s complaining protagonist may now strike us as an obvious means by which his creator editorializes about “capitalism” and suggests that what readers determine to be an author’s thematic concerns changes over time. *The Catcher in the Rye* has not changed, but we have. And just as our eyes see elements in Holden Caulfield’s angst that may have been invisible to reviewers in 1951, so our eyes now see themes—and talent—in *Wise Blood* that many critics in 1952 did not. How readers’ eyes have been opened and refocused as they looked at O’Connor’s work is another subject of this study.

O’Connor has been largely canonized by the academy, but to some she is viewed in the same light that Rayber, the self-righteous schoolteacher in *The Violent Bear It Away*, views his prophesying uncle: “A type that’s almost extinct.”²⁰ Consider the following review, posted by a reader on Goodreads.com:

How would you feel if you emptied your garbage can on the floor, searching through the contents for a valuable you were sure was lost there, only to end up with muck on your hands? That’s how I felt after reading a collection of the author’s short stories...I don’t find the characters delightful or amusing, as some suggest; the tone of the stories feels as if the author is laughing at me rather than with me. Nor do the stories read as “Gothic” to me; instead, they seem

¹⁸ Richard Ohmann, *Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 61.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

²⁰ O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 15.

postmodern, a genre whose nihilistic pointlessness leaves me cold. As a result, I could find neither connection nor sympathy with the characters and plots.²¹

Time can damage one's reputation just as often as it can enrich it—as demonstrated by Harold Bloom's 1986 introduction to his *Modern Critical Views* anthology of critical essays: "Her pious admirers to the contrary, O'Connor would have bequeathed us even stronger novels and stories, of the eminence of Faulkner's, if she had been able to restrain her spiritual tendentiousness."²² Just who is being tendentious here is debatable. However, Bloom's opinions are shared by other readers not in the ivory tower of the academy: as an Amazon customer remarked in an online review of O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, "Just remember, the writer being dead doesn't mean their work is great."²³

The term "reputation" is a broad one and may encompass elements of an author's personal life, sales, or place in the canon. Each of these elements—and dozens of others—adds one piece to what Robert Giroux called the "total mosaic"²⁴ of an author's reputation. For the purposes of this study, "reputation" will be used to suggest the shared understandings, between many camps of readers and other artists, about a writer's thematic concerns and artistic performance. Naturally, different groups of readers will have different shared understandings and sometimes these understandings will clash. How the producers of the *Schlitz Playhouse* understood "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" when they adapted it for television did not complement the way that many readers, including O'Connor herself, understood the story; how some reviewers of *The Violent Bear It Away* understood its treatment of Tarwater's life as a

²¹ Tyler, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 8, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed September 21, 2013).

²² Harold Bloom, introduction to *Flannery O'Connor: Bloom's Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 8.

²³ Customer review of *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, October 21, 1999, Amazon.com. (accessed October 13, 2012).

²⁴ Robert Giroux to G. Roysce Smith, 17 June, 1975, Farrar, Straus and Giroux Archives, New York Public Library.

prophet—a burdensome yet unavoidable vocation—clashed with how others understood it as the result of a mental disorder.

A recent incident resulting from O'Connor's exploration of racial themes shows how an author's reputation can be a function of current social assumptions. In the summer of 2000, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was banned from the Catholic schools of Lafayette, Louisiana; the irony of a Catholic Bishop's banning O'Connor's work was not lost on many readers.²⁵ There is also a tendency among her biographers to apologize for her supposed moral failings in terms of race—a trend that began in earnest with the 1979 publication of *The Habit of Being*, the definitive collection of O'Connor's letters. In her introduction, Sally Fitzgerald struggles with the task of addressing O'Connor's views on race in a way that will not put off readers.

Fitzgerald's unease is obvious:

There was an area of sensibility in her that seems to have remained imperfectly developed, as her letters suggest...I have found myself thinking that her own being would have been likewise raised and perfected, completed, by a greater personal empathy with the blacks who were so important a part of the tissue of the South, and of the humanity with whose redemption she was so truly and deeply concerned.²⁶

Yet Fitzgerald soon adds that O'Connor's "will was never in danger on the score of racism."²⁷ If this were the case—which I believe it to be—why the need for the defense? Or why the need for the phrase "which I believe it to be" in the previous sentence, where I added my own defense of O'Connor? Both Fitzgerald and I, it seems, are attempting to protect O'Connor from a charge that can damage a reputation, just as charges of anti-Semitism affected T. S. Eliot's in the 1990s (and today). Terry Eagleton asked, "Why do critics feel a need to defend the authors they write

²⁵ See, for example, J. Bottum, "Flannery O'Connor Banned," *Crisis* 18 (October, 2000): 48-49.

²⁶ Sally Fitzgerald, introduction to *The Habit of Being*, xvi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

on, like doting parents deaf to all criticism of their obnoxious children? Eliot's well-earned reputation is established beyond all doubt, and making him out to be as unflawed as the Archangel Gabriel does him no favours."²⁸ Eagleton here points out how readers who feel the need to defend a writer's reputation may engage in an unnecessary and, in the end, ineffective defense.

Readers who find O'Connor's work important and relevant may be irked by a one-star review of *Wise Blood* on Goodreads.com. But such readers should also be aware of what Barbra Herrnstein Smith calls "contingencies of value," what Richard Ohmann calls the "politics of letters," what John Rodden calls "the politics of literary reputation," and what other historians have skillfully revealed in their reception histories of figures such as Faulkner, Hemingway, and Erica Jong.²⁹ O'Connor is one of our greatest literary artists, but not simply because readers have "caught up" to her or that her genius has become more visible over time. Her admirers' urging her work on their friends and students are far from voices crying in the wilderness. Her reputation and establishment in the canon can be examined not only as the result of her brilliance and talent but also as the result of a network of events, chance occurrences, personal relationships, media adaptations, and cultural institutions. The purpose of this study is to examine how this network affected and continues to affect O'Connor's literary identity. This book tells the story of the understanding and misunderstanding, the reading and misreading, the attacks and eventual canonization—in the literary sense—of Flannery O'Connor. *Why*

²⁸ Terry Eagleton, "Raine's Sterile Thunder," *Prospect*, March 22, 2007, <http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/rainessterilethunder/> (accessed September 22, 2012).

²⁹ See, for example, Lawrence H. Schwartz, *Creating Faulkner's Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1988); Scott Donaldson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Charlotte Templin, *Feminism and the Politics of Literary Reputation: The Example of Erica Jong* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Press, 1995).

O'Connor matters is one story; this one is about *how* she has mattered to publishers, readers, and other artists.

CHAPTER 1

The Two Receptions of *Wise Blood*

In 1945, Flannery O'Connor, a twenty-year-old graduate of Georgia State College for Women, made a trip north to enquire about admission to the Iowa Writers' Workshop. Brad Gooch recounts the initial meeting of O'Connor and Paul Engle, who was then the Workshop's director:

When she finally spoke, her Georgia dialect sounded so thick to his Midwestern ear that he asked her to repeat her question. Embarrassed by an inability a second time to understand, Engle handed her a pad to write what she had said. So in schoolgirl script, she put down three short lines: "My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writers' Workshop?"¹

This was not the first or the last time that someone would have trouble understanding O'Connor; while Engle, after reading her stories, immediately recognized her talent, literary agents, publishers, screenwriters, editors, and, of course, reviewers from the first have responded to her work in a number of ways, often lauding her talent but sometimes puzzled by, or downright hostile to, her work. The reception of *Wise Blood* over the course of two different publishers' releases of the novel, separated by the span of ten years, reflects the ways in which an initial befuddlement can be forgotten in the wake of a new critical understanding.

In *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation*, Peter J. Rabinowitz charts the actual process of reading and then categorize various rules that readers follow when making sense of a text. He knows that reading is a messy endeavor, a "complex holistic process in which various rules interact with one another in ways that we may never

¹ Brad Gooch, *Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009), 117.

understand, even though we seem to have little difficulty putting them into practice intuitively.”² Rabinowitz calls the first of these “rules of notice”: since a text offers an overwhelming amount of data, readers need to privilege certain details at the expense of others. The notion that every word of a text is as important as any other has been argued by many, especially in light of the New Critics, whose effects are still widely felt in close-reading exercises in classrooms across the country. Rabinowitz, however, contends that “the way people actually read and write” is by creating what Gary Saul Morson calls “hierarchies of relevance that make some of [a text’s] details central and others peripheral.”³ Rabinowitz’s rules of notice “tell us where to concentrate our attention” and offer “the basic structure on which to build an interpretation,” since “interpretations start, at least, with the most notable details.”⁴ Rules of notice concerning titles, for example, suggest where a reader should focus his or her attention before reading—hence Rabinowitz’s own title, which perfectly illustrates the very phenomena he describes. Knowing the title of Shakespeare’s “Scottish play,” for example, adds weight to the words of the witches and soldiers in the opening scenes when they mention the title character’s name, just as Hemingway’s choice of *The Sun Also Rises* as a title instructs readers what to notice in terms of the universality of his thematic concerns. In short, rules of notice help readers begin to make meaning out of a mass of information.

A comparable phenomenon occurs when reviewers tackle a work by an unknown author. A large and broad survey of representative examples from the original reviews of *Wise Blood*, first published by Harcourt, Brace and Company in 1952, suggests that O’Connor’s reputation

² Peter L. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 46.

³ Gary Saul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky’s Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 46. Quoted in Rabinowitz, 49.

⁴ Rabinowitz, 53.

was initially formed according to critical rules of notice governing what was worth observing about an unknown author, or one at least unknown outside the local scene. In this case, instead of rules of notice governing titles, openings, and closings, we see rules of notice involving age, gender, and geography. What O'Connor's original reviewers found important—what they noticed about her and her first novel and what they urged their readers to notice in kind—suggests some of the assumptions about authorship shared by the critical community and how the groundwork for O'Connor's reputation was laid. Nobody today could write a review of a newly-discovered manuscript by Joyce or Faulkner without drawing upon, directly or indirectly, the complicated reputations of these two figures. Even readers only vaguely familiar with these writers who have never read a word of their work will already know that they are identified with specific places, that they are prized by the academy, and that they wrote “difficult” novels. Such is one effect of how rules of notice can be applied to a writer's career as well as his or her work—and how, once established, what is noticed begins to help creating a reputation. All the watchwords and phrases that O'Connor's critics would employ for the next fifty years are present in the original reviews of *Wise Blood*, although there is, we shall see, one important part of O'Connor's current reputation almost entirely missing from these reviews.

The first rule of notice that many reviewers followed was to treat O'Connor's age as if it were a definitive quality. The *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, for example, called O'Connor a “Young Writer with a Bizarre Tale to Tell”⁵ and *Newsweek* called her “perhaps the most naturally gifted of the youngest generation of American novelists.”⁶ One of her earliest

⁵ Sylvia Stallings, “Young Writer with a Bizarre Tale to Tell,” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, May 18, 1952, 3. Reprinted in *Flannery O'Connor: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. R. Neil Scott and Irwin H. Streight (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 151.

⁶ “Frustrated Preacher,” *Newsweek*, May 19, 1952, 114, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 9.

notices in the press ends, “Her book is dedicated to her mother,”⁷ suggesting O’Connor’s youth and her first foray into the world of publishing as the little girl striving to please her parent. Other reviewers linked O’Connor’s youth to her Southern identity, treating O’Connor as if she were a type rather than an individual. Noticing geography—and asking readers to notice it, too—would presumably allow a reader to better understand O’Connor and why she wrote about figures as odd as Hazel Motes. The opening sentence of John W. Simons’s review in *Commonweal*—“This is the first novel of a twenty-six year-old Georgia woman”⁸—implies that age and region are elements with meanings and associations too obvious to warrant explanation. The reviewer notices them for the reader, who then uses them to begin forming opinions of the subject’s work. The original reviews are filled with mentions of O’Connor’s Southern roots, regardless of whether the review is one that lauds or dismisses the novel. For example, William Goyen’s assessment in the *New York Times Book Review* begins, “Written by a Southerner from Georgia, this first novel, whose language is Tennessee-Georgia dialect expertly wrought into a clipped, elliptic, and blunt style, introduces its author as a writer of power.”⁹ An unnamed critic writing in *Newsweek* praised O’Connor’s previous work as original, but also revealed his position as a Northerner who brought to *Wise Blood* certain assumptions about the South: “In 1946 she attracted the attention of advance-guard critics with a story in a little magazine, *Accent*. In fact, she originated a curious kind of extremely personal fiction, odd little stories about Southerners who were backward but intelligent, brutal but poetic, like hard-boiled Emily Dickinson.”¹⁰ That Southerners could be as intelligent or as poetic as the Belle of Amherst was,

⁷ “May 15 is Publication Date of Novel by Flannery O’Connor, Milledgeville,” Milledgeville *Union-Recorder*, April 25, 1952, 1, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 3-4.

⁸ John W. Simons, “A Case of Possession,” *Commonweal* 56 (June 27, 1952), 297.

⁹ William Goyen, “Unending Vengeance,” *New York Times Book Review*, May 18, 1952, 4.

apparently, some kind of revelation. Such an innovation was striking enough to Martin Greenberg, who noted in *American Mercury* that while *Wise Blood* was “full of violence, primitivism, degeneracy, and decay” and “smack in the tradition of Southern fiction,” it overleapt the supposed limits of its genre:

I was astonished to discover as I read along in the story, it is also a philosophical novel, a very rare bird in this genre of writing. I don't mean to imply by this that there are no Big Ideas in the works of Faulkner. There are, but only implicitly and as it were unwittingly, and the reader has to get them out of the story for himself; whereas the elements of *Wise Blood's* story...are manipulated to yield an idea directly.¹¹

A writer across the Atlantic offered a similar observation when the novel was first issued by the London publisher Neville Spearman in 1955: “Miss Flannery O'Connor is one of those writers from the American South whose gifts, intense, erratic, and strange, demand more than a customary effort of understanding from the English reader...Miss O'Connor may become an important writer.”¹² Again, the reviewer leads with what he finds worthy of notice; again, the assumption that writers from the American South (“one of those”) make particular demands upon their readers seems a truth so universally acknowledged that readers required no further elaboration. O'Connor's region and age are almost always presented as liabilities over which (to those who admired *Wise Blood*) she had triumphed or (to her detractors) had proven to be hurdles that were too high.

One reason for so many mentions of O'Connor's home region—why this fact was often emphasized as another rule of notice—had to do not only with the novel's setting of Eastrod, Tennessee, but with an assumption about Southern art that had been trumpeted decades before

¹⁰ “Frustrated Preacher,” 9.

¹¹ Martin Greenberg, “Books in Short,” *American Mercury* 75 (July 1952), 113, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 15.

¹² “Grave and Gay,” *Times Literary Supplement*, September 2, 1955, 505, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 25.

O'Connor began her career. In 1917, H. L. Mencken's famous (or notorious) essay, "The Sahara of the Bozart," appeared in *The New York Evening Mail*; its title (with its phonetic spelling of "beau-arts") reflects Mencken's view of the land of cotton as a cultural wasteland:

Down there a poet is now rare as a philosopher or an oboe-player. The vast region south of the Potomac is as large as Europe. You could lose France, Germany and Italy in it, with the British Isles for good measure. And yet it is as sterile, artistically, intellectually, culturally, as the Sahara Desert. It would be difficult in all history to match so amazing a drying-up of civilization.¹³

Mencken further states that James Branch Cabell was the only Southern novelist "whose work shows any originality or vitality" and that, in his life as an editor, he has found betting on the appearance of The Great Southern Novel a losing proposition:

Part of my job in the world is the reading of manuscripts, chiefly by new authors. I go through hundreds every week. This business has taught me some curious things, and among them the fact that the literary passion is segregated geographically, and with it the literary talent...The South is an almost complete blank. I don't see one printable manuscript from down there a week. And in my more than three years of steady reading the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Tennessee have not offered six taken together.¹⁴

Mencken's reason for this dearth of talent—that "the civil war actually finished off nearly all the civilized folk in the South and thus left the country to the poor white trash, whose descendants now run it"¹⁵—might have been contested at the time, but his assumptions concerning the South were held by many readers and reviewers when *Wise Blood* was first published. Edward S. Shapiro has examined the ways in which the assumptions that girded Mencken's essay later motivated the Fugitives and Southern Agrarians, noting, "The Agrarians were amazed and horrified by these bitter attacks on the South by Mencken and his imitators. Even more shocking

¹³ H. L. Mencken, "The Sahara of the Bozart," in *The Impossible H. L. Mencken*, ed. Marion Elizabeth Rodgers (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 491.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 493.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

was their acceptance by much of the country as an authentic picture of the South.”¹⁶ Decades of such acceptance, coupled with the image of Southern religious experience as akin to the kind faked by Elmer Gantry in Sinclair Lewis’s 1926 novel (dedicated to Mencken) surely had reinforced many readers’ impressions of the South. O’Connor’s home state was thus very much viewed as worthy of notice, as a key part of her identity, and the cornerstone of her burgeoning reputation. But it was also a part of her newly-forming reputation of which the author often complained: in a 1955 interview, O’Connor stated that *Wise Blood* was not “about the South” but more universal truths: “A serious novelist is in pursuit of reality. And of course when you’re a Southerner and in pursuit of reality, the reality you come up with is going to have a Southern accent, but that’s just an accent; it’s not the essence of what you’re trying to do.”¹⁷ Still, O’Connor could be defensive of how the South when she felt it was being trampled under foot: in a 1963 letter describing the publication in the *New Yorker* of Eudora Welty’s “Where Is the Voice Coming From,” a fictional treatment of the murder of Medgar Evers, O’Connor fumed, “What I hate most is its being in the *New Yorker* and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over typical life in the dear old dirty Southland.”¹⁸ O’Connor knew from early in her career that her reputation would always be a function of her being a Southerner; she tried to manage this part of her image as best she could. What she resented, and what surfaces in some of the early reviews, is how “Southern” becomes a watchword connoting backward, regressive social policies and antimodern attitudes. Such an assumption is one that many contemporary readers still bring to O’Connor’s work.

¹⁶ Edward S. Shapiro, “The Southern Agrarians, H. L. Mencken, and the Quest for Southern Identity,” *American Studies* 13: 2 (1972), 77.

¹⁷ Transcript of the *Galley Proof* television program filmed in May 1955. Reprinted in *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 8.

¹⁸ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 1 September 1963, in *The Habit of Being*, 537.

Almost as if they had anticipated a response in the urban press that treated *Wise Blood* as a hard-hitting exposé rather than a work of the imagination, some Southern writers used their reviews as occasions to suggest that the South was in fact a place of culture and sophistication. One of O'Connor's first notices in the press was local: the Milledgeville *Union-Recorder* blazoned O'Connor's entry into the literary marketplace with the headline, "May 15 is Publication Date of Novel by Flannery O'Connor, Milledgeville." Noting that *Wise Blood* had been acquired by Harcourt, Brace and Company, "one of the country's leading publishing houses," the piece quotes Caroline Gordon's praise of the novel and revealingly introduces Gordon as a "New York Critic,"¹⁹ rather than the wife of Allen Tate. According to the byline, even a Yankee could not deny the talent of this Southern artist. Assumptions about the cultural weight of different regions seemed to be in play regardless of where one stood in terms of the Mason-Dixon Line. This review is actually more of a press release than a critical evaluation. Like later reviews, the piece mentions O'Connor's age; unlike other reviews, however, the piece mentions O'Connor's Southern roots as part of her artistic pedigree and as natural avenues to an implied future success. Similarly, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* used the upcoming publication of *Wise Blood* as an example of Southern cultural superiority: its headline, "Miss O'Connor Adds Luster to Georgia," suggests that O'Connor was worthy of praise for defeating the very assumptions articulated by writers like Mencken. The opening sentence, "Georgia's vitality in the field of literature continues, a fact which is brought to our attention by an autograph party being given by the Georgia State College for Women for Miss Flannery O'Connor,"²⁰ reveals the true subject of the article to be the worthiness of Southern writers and

¹⁹ "May 15 is Publication Date of Novel by Flannery O'Connor, Milledgeville," in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 3.

²⁰ "Miss O'Connor Adds Luster to Georgia," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 10, 1952, 4, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 5.

their importance to the national literary scene. The article ends with praise of O'Connor's individual talents and those of Georgians as a whole: "We congratulate her as another in the list of Georgians who by production of first-rate writing keep Georgia's name before the nation in a favorable and commendable light."²¹ Upon the novel's release, the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* again touted O'Connor as a local hero: "In a novel whose overtones are chilling and whose horror is undiluted, Georgia introduces an extraordinary talent."²² But even this piece of puffery contains a moment where the writer indulges in the fostering of some clichés that would contribute to O'Connor's reputation, noting that "the very same goblins" that plague the characters "might 'git' you!"²³ In general, however, the publication of *Wise Blood* was likened in the Southern press as akin to the debutante's entrance at a cotillion. The reviewers also implied that those in the North were not the unquestionable arbiters of artistic quality.

If O'Connor's age and address proved surprising to some reviewers, her gender proved more so. The *Newsweek* piece compounds clichés about the South with those concerning young, female novelists: "In her personal life," it states, "Miss O'Connor is warm and pleasant, with a soft Southern drawl, but nobody will ever guess it from her stories."²⁴ Such an assumption about what one might "guess" about an author's gender informs Martin Greenberg's review in *The American Mercury*—the journal founded by Mencken in 1924—in which he offers what stands as the most left-handed compliment in O'Connor's early reception: after declaring that "the author of *Wise Blood* clearly has great gifts," he clarifies his praise by adding, "You would never

²¹ Ibid.

²² Martha Smith, "Georgian Pens *Wise Blood*, A First Novel," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 18, 1952, F7, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 7.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ "Frustrated Preacher," 114.

guess from the vigor and boldness of the writing that Flannery O'Connor is a woman."²⁵ Such a qualified compliment was also given by Evelyn Waugh, who, when asked for a blurb for the dust jacket, responded, "If this really is the unaided work of a young lady, it is a remarkable product."²⁶ Greenberg's parting shot, that some of the novel's strained humor might be "chalked up to the writer's youthfulness,"²⁷ allows his review to stand as a representative example of the initial positive response to *Wise Blood*: a noteworthy first novel, especially when one considers the age and gender of its source.

O'Connor herself had little concern with her identity as a female author: she once dismissed the entire topic by cracking, "I just never think, that is never think of qualities which are specifically feminine or masculine. I suppose I divide people into two classes: the Irksome and the Non-Irksome without regard for sex."²⁸ Her reviewers, however, thought otherwise—as did O'Connor's mother, Regina, who asked her daughter to write an introduction to the novel for Katie Semmes, the novelist's eighty-four year-old cousin and a social doyen, so that she would not be "shocked" by the novel's content. O'Connor soon complained to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, "This piece has to be in the tone of the Sacred Heart Messenger"²⁹ and she never composed it. In his biography of O'Connor, Brad Gooch recounts the horrified Cousin Katie (as she was called) "penning notes of apology to all the priests who had received copies" and reacting, like O'Connor's Aunt Mary Cline, in a "horrified and theatrical" manner to *Wise Blood*'s frank portrayal of Mrs. Leora Watts, the whore with the "friendliest bed in town," and

²⁵ Greenberg, "Books in Short," 113.

²⁶ Quoted in Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 501.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 22 September 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 176.

²⁹ O'Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, April 1952, in *The Habit of Being*, 33.

Sabbath Lily Hawks, the fifteen-year-old who Motes also beds during the course of his twisted pilgrimage. O'Connor's college writing instructor was shocked by her student's first work for its inclusion of such objectionable material, and other "ladies who lunch in Milledgeville" were horrified by what they read because it came from the pen of one whom they thought should have known better. Even a contemporary admirer of *Wise Blood*, an editor for the *Alumnae Journal* of the Georgia State College for Women who knew O'Connor and had once commissioned her cartoons, noted, "What to do? Everybody liked the child. Everybody was glad that she'd gotten something published, but one did wish it had been something ladylike."³⁰

The original reviews are also notable for their establishing one of the prominent watchwords, an antithesis of "ladylike," that would be used by both critics and O'Connor herself for the rest of her career. Anyone who studies O'Connor at any length—even casually—cannot avoid encountering the word "grotesque," frequently used as a noun to describe O'Connor's characters and as an adjective to describe her style and manner. Derived from the Italian *grottesca*, the word originally described the fantastic visual style of excavated Roman grottoes. The term seems to have been first applied to literature by William Hazlitt, who lectured, "Our literature, in a word, is Gothic and grotesque; unequal and irregular; not cast in a previous mould, nor of one uniform texture, but of great weight in the whole, and of incomparable value in the best parts."³¹ In American literature, the word's most notable appearance is in the title of Poe's 1840 collection *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (which does not explicitly define the term); almost sixty years later, Sherwood Anderson would title his introductory episode in *Winesburg, Ohio*, "The Book of the Grotesque." In all these examples, the word lacks any of the negative connotations it might carry in casual, contemporary conversation or, as we shall see, in

³⁰ Gooch, 207-210.

³¹ William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Dramatic Literature of the Age of Elizabeth* (London: John Warren, 1821), 36.

some reviews of *Wise Blood*. John Rodden coined the term “watchword” for any descriptor that gains critical and cultural momentum when used to describe a writer or his art. The watchword “grotesque” makes its first appearances in conjunction with O’Connor in these reviews and has shown little sign of stopping in present-day discussions of her work: in the last ten years, at least twenty-five books, articles, and dissertations have been written on the topic of O’Connor and the grotesque.³²

In terms of O’Connor’s reputation, the watchword first appeared in a short, unsigned, and dismissive review in the pages of the *Bulletin from Virginia’s Kirkus’s Book Shop Service* in May, 1952. After describing each of *Wise Blood*’s characters and recounting Hazel Motes’s fate, the reviewer states, “A grotesque—for the more zealous avant-gardists; for others, a deep anesthesia.”³³ Here, the term is used disparagingly, suggesting that *Wise Blood* is not a novel but some other, lesser form—and a form appealing to only a small part of the reading public. However, this reviewer’s attitude toward the grotesque was not dominant among the initial reviewers, most of whom used the term, even when not defining it, to describe what they found difficult to characterize. For example, the *Savannah Morning News* described the “excruciating directness” and “graphic manner” of the novel before stating that the novel works by “sweeping the reader from one grotesque and baffling situation to another.”³⁴ The *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* praised *Wise Blood* as “a tale at once delicate and grotesque,”³⁵ the term

³² A search of the *MLA International Bibliography* with the search terms “O’Connor” and “grotesque” yields twenty-five results (accessed October 7, 2012).

³³ “Wise Blood,” *Bulletin from Virginia’s Kirkus’s Book Shop Service*, May 1, 1952, 285, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 4.

³⁴ “Damnation of Man,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 1952, 40, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 11.

³⁵ Sylvia Stallings, “Young Writer with a Bizarre Tale to Tell,” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, May 18, 1953, 3, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 8.

here presumably referring to the raw emotion and violence found throughout the novel. Other reviewers used the term to suggest the extremes to which O'Connor took her characters and readers: one noted that, in the course of the plot, "occasional comedy yields to the grotesque, and the grotesque to horror"³⁶; another noted, "Grotesques, to hold interest, must be extra convincing"³⁷; still another argued against O'Connor's lack of restraint by stating that the novel is an example of how "the grotesque itself may reach a point of diminishing returns."³⁸ R.W.B. Lewis wrote, "The characters seem to be grotesque variations on each other" while complaining about the novel's "horridly surrealistic set of characters,"³⁹ revealing his assumption that the grotesque can destroy any sense of verisimilitude: if all of a novel's characters are grotesques, the presumably-normal reader is unable to share in their struggles. Perhaps—but again, the watchword "grotesque" is used here as if it illuminated, rather than obfuscated, O'Connor's artistic performance; the same can be said for "horridly surrealistic," a phrase that does not accurately describe *Wise Blood* or any of O'Connor's work. Calling O'Connor's characters "grotesques" is a way of sounding specific while sidestepping the critical challenge of describing such figures as the dimwitted Enoch Emery or the penitent Hazel Motes. As we shall see with the issue of "satire," many reviewers responded to the strangeness of O'Connor's work by trying to quantify that strangeness and bring it to heel.

Only Carl Hartman, writing in the *Western Review*, gave the grotesque its due. His review begins with a quick manifesto on the grotesque that is perhaps the single most useful

³⁶ Unsigned review of *Wise Blood*, *United States Quarterly Book Review* 8 (Summer, 1952), 256, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 18.

³⁷ Oliver LaFarge, "Manic Gloom," *Saturday Review* 35 (May 24, 1952), 22, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 10.

³⁸ Carl Hartman, "Jesus Without Christ," *Western Review* 17 (Autumn 1952), 80, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 22.

³⁹ R. W. B. Lewis, "Eccentrics' Pilgrimage," *Hudson Review* 6 (Spring 1953), 148, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 24.

approach to O'Connor's use of grotesque characters and situations. His explication of what constitutes the grotesque and the artistic challenges it presents can be read as a corrective to his fellow reviewers, who used the term indiscriminately:

That which is merely distorted or merely horrible or merely funny is not grotesque; that which *is* grotesque must, to exist as such, remain always on a very fine line somewhere in between the divergent forces which comprise and orient its grotesqueness. The grotesque must be held in its artistic place, so to speak, through the tensions of its own almost diametrically opposed qualities—through, for example, the juxtaposition and combining of ugliness with beauty, reality with unreality, normalcy and abnormality, humor with the distinctly unfunny. And these conflicting elements, whatever they may be, must be synthesized in such a way that their final emphasis is that of a true and special amalgam, not a hodge-podge. A slight push too far in any single direction...will send the whole structure toppling.⁴⁰

The Misfit and Hugla, Rayber and Old Tarwater, Rufus and F. O. Parker are all prefigured in these remarks. Hoffman knew and articulated what others did not: that O'Connor was an artist who perfected the use of such striking combinations, of which the human and the divine make the ultimate example.

Finally, the original reviews of *Wise Blood* offer an array of allusions: by examining the writers to whom she was compared, a contemporary reader can better understand the original reviewers' difficulty in characterizing a writer as singular as O'Connor. Again, many reviewers responded to her strangeness by attempting to limit it, often by comparing her to more widely-known authors. Unsurprisingly, her work was frequently compared to that of Faulkner and Carson McCullers, and her characters were compared to those of Erskine Caldwell—the last comparison more cultural shorthand and surely not any great compliment to O'Connor. Other comparisons were more attuned to the values and assumptions that informed O'Connor's art: her debt to Dostoevsky, for example, was mentioned by several reviewers who sensed that O'Connor had more in common with the nineteenth-century Russian than Faulkner, her celebrated near-

⁴⁰ Hartman, 19. Emphasis in original.

contemporary from Mississippi.⁴¹ Still other perceptive reviewers noted the thematic similarities between the novel and “The Hound of Heaven,” Francis Thompson’s poem about a Christ-haunted renegade, as well as the characters’ similarities to those created by Poe, O’Neill, and (however improbably) Steinbeck.⁴²

Wise Blood was also placed—in its very first and many subsequent reviews—“in the tradition of Kafka,”⁴³ both as a means of praise and of attack: one of the most cutting remarks about the novel was that it reads “as if Kafka had been set to writing the continuity for *Lil’ Abner*.”⁴⁴ Perhaps Caroline Gordon, whose instincts O’Connor trusted absolutely, fostered such a notion, since she described and praised the novel as “Kafkaesque” in her original dust-jacket blurb, surely to do her friend a favor and place the novel in the realm of the respectable. But does such a term truly reflect the novel? “Kafkaesque” suggests a world filled with great struggles and questions, but few results and fewer answers. The world of *Wise Blood* is just the opposite: there is a narrative center that ultimately gives meaning to Motes’s struggles and without which the novel is a series of escalating and empty horrors. The Haze who stumbles in darkness at the end of the novel, wrapped in barbed wire and knowing that he can no longer flee the Hound of Heaven, would never compare himself to Joseph K. or Gregor Samsa. As Motes tells his landlady after his literal blinding that leads to spiritual vision, “There’s no other house no nor other city”⁴⁵ to which he intends to flee. The meaning of his actions is inescapable.

⁴¹ Both the previously-cited articles, “Damnation of Man” and John W. Simons, “A Case of Possession,” compare O’Connor’s work to Dostoevsky’s.

⁴² The unnamed author of “Damnation of Man” notes that *Wise Blood* recalls “the cruelty of Steinbeck.”

⁴³ “New Creative Writers,” *Library Journal*, February 15, 1952, 354, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 3.

⁴⁴ “Southern Dissonance,” *Time*, June 9, 1952, 110.

⁴⁵ Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), 228.

The question remains what the original reviewers thought the book was “about”: what did they identify as *Wise Blood*’s important issues? The very first of O’Connor’s reviewers, writing in the *Library Journal*, remarked that the novel “is about the South” and “southern religionists,”⁴⁶ as if the complicated definition of the first topic were readily understood by all readers and the types mentioned as the second topic were absolute and recognizable at first glance. Another reviewer stated that Motes’s struggle is “made the vehicle for some wry commentary on life”⁴⁷—a statement only slightly less vague than the one previously quoted but of a piece with a number of reviews that spoke of the novel’s themes in only the most general terms. Other reviewers, dodging their duty of evaluating the work and justifying their opinions, simply retold the plot, scene for scene, including what is surely meant to be the shocking surprise of Motes’s self-blinding and death. A reader of *Wise Blood*’s original reviews will be struck by how often reviewers gave away these crucial moments in the novel, seemingly motivated to do so by the inability to say anything about its issues or O’Connor’s style. Such a presumed inability raises the question of just what these original reviewers thought they were reviewing: neither O’Connor’s thematic concerns nor artistic performance were given due diligence by many reviewers. Surely, Motes’s self-blinding is meant to shock the reader as much as it does his landlady—and the effects of such a shock on the reader is part of what makes O’Connor’s art so disconcerting and powerful. To inform the reader of such an event makes an indirect admission that *Wise Blood* had proven too strange for some readers, who attacked the strangeness by exposing it and robbing it of its bite.

⁴⁶ “New Creative Writers,” 3.

⁴⁷ Milton S. Byam, review of *Wise Blood*, *Library Journal* 77 (May 15, 1952), 894, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 5.

Most surprising is that only a single original review of *Wise Blood* mentions O'Connor's Catholicism or the Catholic themes of the novel—a rule of notice and defining aspect of her reputation that today seems impossible to forget or avoid. O'Connor is as identified as a Catholic novelist today as automatically as Philip Roth is as a Jewish one—so automatically, in fact, that one must be reminded that this was not always the case. Even more surprising, the single review that does mention her Catholicism does so in an incidental manner, as if the religion that informed every word she wrote and is perhaps the most frequent and prominent watchword of her present reputation was a bit of interesting, but not crucial, information: the *Newsweek* piece notes, “She is a Catholic in her religion, and at present is trying to read all the works of Henry James, but not making much headway with them, and writes every morning from 9 to 12, finding it hard work.”⁴⁸ Soon after the novel's publication, O'Connor had written in a letter to Betty Boyd Love, “The thought is all Catholic, perhaps overbearingly so,”⁴⁹ but almost none of the original reviewers thought the same. Of course, literature is not simply a subcategory of any creed, nor is Catholicism the only meaningful avenue into O'Connor's work. But the fact that her Catholicism was simply not an issue to many original reviewers reminds us that what seems like an obvious part of an author's reputation was not always visible. Perhaps the notion of an author's being Southern, female, and Catholic was too improbable a combination for O'Connor's initial reviewers to consider.

As if not noticing O'Connor's Catholic themes was not surprising enough, many of the original reviewers assumed that her approach to Motes's struggle was satirical and sarcastic, rather than sincere. Again, some reviewers' responses to the issues O'Connor raised—issues as thorny as sin, redemption, and the reality of Christ—was to assume that her aim was ironic; an

⁴⁸ “Frustrated Preacher,” 114.

⁴⁹ O'Connor to Betty Boyd Love, 20 September, 1952, in *The Habit of Being*, 43.

examination of the original reviews reveals an effort to contain or to neutralize O'Connor's Catholic themes and assume that she was mocking Motes rather than presenting him as a person worthy of understanding. Descriptions of *Wise Blood* as a novel treating "the difficult subject of religious mania"⁵⁰ or one about which "we may assume, if we wish, that Christ has gained a wordless victory"⁵¹ both miss the mark, for Motes is not subject to any "mania" but the call of Christ who moves like "a wild ragged figure" from "tree to tree in the back of his mind."⁵² Similarly, by noting that we "may assume" Christ's victory "if we wish" suggests that making such an assumption is purely a matter of opinion, when O'Connor's text portrays Christ's victory as absolute. Motes's troubles are spiritual, not psychological, and if Christ has not gained a victory in him, the novel is an empty gallery of horrors. Such a response to her work, that suggests O'Connor is satirizing "religious mania" rather than dramatizing the encounter of the human and the divine, hints at what would come later in her career, when some readers of *The Violent Bear It Away* would suggest that Tarwater's eventual acceptance of his vocation to become a prophet was the result of his being "brainwashed" by his great-uncle. Granted, Isaac Rosenfeld (in *The New Republic*) did note that "the theme of *Wise Blood* is Christ the Pursuer, the Ineluctable," but he also complained that O'Connor fails to fully explore this theme because "Motes is plain crazy, and Miss O'Connor has all along presented him this way."⁵³ His remarks here resemble those made in another review, where a critic calls Motes "completely insane"⁵⁴ before his death—although every word of *Wise Blood* depicts Motes's movement *toward* sanity,

⁵⁰ Stallings, "Young Writer with a Bizarre Tale to Tell," 3.

⁵¹ Simons, "A Case of Possession," 298.

⁵² O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 22.

⁵³ Isaac Rosenfeld, "To Win by Default," *The New Republic* 127 (July 7, 1952), 19.

⁵⁴ LaFarge, "Manic Gloom," 10.

albeit with a few reversals and with a horrifying cost. “Plain crazy” and “completely insane” are like claims that *Wise Blood* is filled with “grotesques” and is “about the South”: they barely illuminate O’Connor’s thematic concerns and artistic performance. Brad Gooch describes the reviewers’ dilemma by stating that the novel “was obviously satiric, but the object of the satire could be a question mark,”⁵⁵ but even this misses some of the point: why *Wise Blood* is “obviously satiric” is never explained, nor does Gooch suggest any possible targets of O’Connor’s satire. Without identifiable targets, “satirical” becomes more a vague descriptor than an illuminating term—much like “grotesque.”

The most complete initial treatment of O’Connor’s thematic concerns and artistic performance appeared not in one of the major outlets, but in *Shenandoah*, the literary magazine of Washington and Lee University founded in 1950, two years before the publication of *Wise Blood*. *Shenandoah* had begun as an anthology of student work, but soon became an important quarterly under the direction of Thomas Carter, who attracted a number of notable authors and critics to its pages.⁵⁶ When Carter asked Andrew Lytle, O’Connor’s instructor at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, for a review, Lytle declined, writing Carter that O’Connor was a “fine talent” but an author whose theology—the foundation of her thematic concerns—was limiting her art: “There is a move toward the Old Church on the part of some of my friends,” he explained, “and I’m afraid an extraneous zeal is confusing their artistry.”⁵⁷ O’Connor had not written the book that Lytle wanted her to write, and his refusal to review *Wise Blood* reflects how

⁵⁵ Gooch, 204.

⁵⁶ “What is the history of Shenandoah,” <http://shenandoahliterary.org/faq/#history> (accessed October 14, 2012).

⁵⁷ Unpublished letter to Thomas H. Carter, 24 June 1952, Thomas Carter Papers, University Library, Washington and Lee University, Lexington VA. Quoted in Gooch, 212.

some other reviewers and readers responded to the novel's urgent and unapologetic religious themes: by dismissing or avoiding them.

Carter next asked Brainard Cheney, the Agrarian novelist, to review the novel. Cheney proved to be a reader O'Connor deserved; his review warrants attention because of how it articulated the style and issues that today strike readers as unquestionably and automatically hers but which many readers in 1952 failed to recognize. His six-page-long review, which seems even longer juxtaposed with Faulkner's single-paragraph review of *The Old Man and The Sea* immediately preceding it, is both a recognition of O'Connor's unique voice and praise for how she had surpassed other Southern writers who had explored ways in which the nation's "Patent Electric Blanket"—its sense of security—had become less comforting in the South. Like other reviewers, Cheney compared O'Connor to Caldwell and Faulkner, but argued that Caldwell was merely a "dull pornographer" and that Faulkner, "one of the great visionaries of our time," could write about religion in *As I Lay Dying* but had still not "been granted the grace of vision."⁵⁸ Cheney noted that Caldwell and Faulkner described the hungers of the Southern soul but missed the artistic mark by ascribing that hunger to social class (as in *Tobacco Road*) or naturalistic forces (as in *As I Lay Dying*):

Wise Blood is not about belly hunger, nor religious nostalgia, but about the persistent craving of the soul. It is not about a man whose religious allegiance is a name for shiftlessness and fatalism that make him degenerate in poverty and bestial before hunger, nor about a family of rustics who sink in naturalistic anonymity when the religious elevation of their burial rite is over. It is about man's inescapable need of his fearful, if blind, search for salvation. Miss O'Connor has not been confused by the symptoms.⁵⁹

Like other reviewers, Cheney revealed surprises in the plot, but did so in the spirit of appreciation and analysis, noting, for example, that when Motes's car is pushed down the hill by

⁵⁸ Brainard Cheney, review of *Wise Blood*, *Shenandoah* 3: 3 (Autumn, 1952), 57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

the policeman, the scene is “the first apparent clue to Haze’s reembodiment of the Christ-myth, this ironic *temptation* from the mountain-top.”⁶⁰ Whether or not a reader finds Cheney’s analysis here convincing, he or she can appreciate Cheney’s taking the novel on terms other than assuming it existed as a series of cruel jokes about its protagonist and his spiritual longing.

O’Connor wholly appreciated Cheney’s review, writing him that she had been “surprised again and again to learn what a tough character I must be to have produced a work so lacking in what one lady called ‘love.’ The love of God doesn’t count or else I didn’t make it recognizable.”⁶¹ O’Connor’s words here reflect the general idea that a reviewer, like Motes himself, can only see what his or her eyes can hold. She also thanked Cheney for considering the novel “so carefully and with so much understanding” and joked about her local reputation among her “connections,” who thought “it would be nicer if I wrote about nice people.”⁶² Cheney replied, “I am not surprised that your novel did not find popular acceptance” and clarified one source of his enthusiasm: “I’ll have to confess that I was set up for your story: an ex-Protestant, ex-agnostic, who had just found his way back (after 10 or 12 generations) to The Church.”⁶³ Perhaps, in this case, it took one to know one: Cheney and his wife were baptized into the Roman Catholic Church a week before he wrote to O’Connor.

Ten years later, in 1962, prompted by the success of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), Farrar, Straus and Cudahy released a second edition of *Wise Blood*, again in hardcover and this time featuring a short introductory note by O’Connor.

⁶⁰ Cheney, 59. Emphasis in original.

⁶¹ O’Connor to Brainard Cheney, 8 February, 1953, in *The Correspondence of Flannery O’Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, ed. C. Ralph Stevens (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶³ Brainard Cheney to O’Connor, 22 March 1953, in *The Correspondence of Flannery O’Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, 4.

While she was pleased at the second edition, O'Connor was not thrilled at what she called the "repulsive"⁶⁴ prospect of writing any kind of explanation:

The fewer claims made for a book, the better chance it has to stand on its own feet. "Explanations" are repugnant to me and to send out a book with directions for its enjoyment is terrible... The man in the street ain't going to read it at all, and the other people who read it will not be able to read it as naively as before.⁶⁵

O'Connor eventually justified her writing of the introduction on the grounds that doing so would "prevent some of the far-out interpretations,"⁶⁶ perhaps those found in the original reviews suggesting that O'Connor was mocking the very themes to which she was committed. Her concern that an introduction would rob readers of the benefit of a "naïve" reading further reminds us that one of O'Connor's artistic aims was to shock her readers by the very events (such as Motes's murder of Solace Layfield, his self-blinding, and his wrapping himself in barbed wire) that so many reviewers described. As she later remarked, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."⁶⁷ Reviewers who gave away the twists of the plot were taming the fiction, making the figures less large and less startling by depriving them of their shock. They were helping to form O'Connor's early reputation as a writer of gruesome grotesques more than one interested in complex spiritual issues.

O'Connor's single-paragraph introductory note can be read as a corrective to what she viewed as misreadings of the novel and a reflection of her by-then established reputation as a Catholic writer. Her description of *Wise Blood* as "a comic novel about a Christian *malgre lui*,

⁶⁴ O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 17 July 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 445.

⁶⁵ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 10 June 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 442.

⁶⁶ O'Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, 7 May 1962, in *The Habit of Being*, 473.

⁶⁷ O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 34.

and as such, very serious”⁶⁸ responds to the critical assumption that her aim was satirical or that her goal was to simply report on the South. Her statement, “That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for some readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence,” addresses those original reviewers who dismissed Motes as insane and who tried to force the square peg of *Wise Blood* into the round hole of modern secularist values. The final sentences of O’Connor’s note are an admonition to those reviewers and future readers who would use her work—or the work of any novelist—to explain away spiritual matters (such as one’s free will contesting with God’s) in an effort to make them less troubling: “Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen.”⁶⁹ The tendency of some readers to reduce the mysteries she explored in her novels eventually became one of her artistic subjects: in *The Violent Bear It Away*, Old Tarwater mocks his nephew, the schoolteacher Rayber, for his attempts to reduce all mysteries to their lowest terms: “Yours not to question the mind of the Lord God Almighty,” he tells him. “Yours not to grind the Lord into your head and spit out a number!”⁷⁰ To O’Connor, art could only “deepen” spiritual questions, not solve them.

However, the reviews of the second edition of *Wise Blood* suggest that O’Connor’s worries about “far-out interpretations” were not entirely justified since fewer critics in 1962 attempted to grind O’Connor into their own heads and spit out a number for their readers than did their counterparts a decade earlier. To one interested in O’Connor’s reputation, these

⁶⁸ O’Connor, “Author’s Note to the Second Edition,” *Wise Blood*, 2nd ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahay, 1962).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 34.

reviews demonstrate the effects of watchwords taking root and a change in how critics approached the mysteries of the novel. The text of *Wise Blood* was exactly the same, but the critical community was not: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *The Violent Bear It Away* had readjusted the critical focus so that the very issues puzzling *Wise Blood*'s initial reviewers now appeared clearer and the novel's excellence now seemed apparent and obvious.

Before many reviewers even discussed the novels' merits, they noted the very practice of releasing it in a second edition. For example, after comparing the novel to *Lolita* and placing O'Connor in sensational company, the *Chicago Sun-Times* noted, "Miss O'Connor's novel, reissued now not in paperback but in hard covers and at a hard cover price, was not a best-seller when it appeared 10 years ago, but it was and is a good novel and should be kept in print."⁷¹ Other reviewers noted that the "happily reissued"⁷² edition of *Wise Blood* was "a literary event,"⁷³ that the reissue "confirmed the arrival on the American literary scene of a novelist of importance,"⁷⁴ and that "Anyone who missed *Wise Blood* when first published 10 years ago should not fail to read it in this new edition."⁷⁵ Such a reissue was "an unusual event in the publishing world—and one of not little significance."⁷⁶ The critical community's endorsement of the reprint reflected a new critical belief, articulated in the *Oakland Tribune*, that *Wise Blood*

⁷¹ Hoke Norris, "A Classic from the Recent Past is Reissued," *Chicago Sun-Times*, September 2, 1962, sec. 3, p. 2, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 190.

⁷² Paul Levine, review of *Wise Blood*, *Jubilee* 10 (December, 1962), 47.

⁷³ Leonard F. X. Mayhew, review of *Wise Blood*, *Commonweal* 108 (February 22, 1963), 576.

⁷⁴ Thomas F. Smith, "Fiction as Prophecy: Novels of Flannery O'Connor Re-Read and Re-Evaluated," *Pittsburgh Catholic*, March 28, 1963, "Fine Arts Supplement," 1, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 194.

⁷⁵ George Knight, "A Merited O'Connor Revival," *Tampa Tribune*, September 30, 1962, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 191.

⁷⁶ Charlotte K. Gafford, "Writers and Readers," *The Bulletin*, October 27, 1962, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 192.

“unquestioningly repays a second reading.”⁷⁷ “Unquestioningly” now, but not so ten years earlier.

One review of the second edition demonstrates the shift in critical attitude toward O'Connor and how previous rules of notice governing what was worth mentioning about O'Connor had changed. Writing in *Christian Century*, Dean Peerman began his review, “An ardent Roman Catholic who is sometimes mistaken for a diabolist or a demoniac, young Georgia novelist Flannery O'Connor is a master of Gothic grotesquerie, but at bottom her stories are far too complex, far too concerned with fundamentals, ever to be mere typifications of that genre.”⁷⁸ O'Connor's age, region, and use of the grotesque are still offered as worthy of notice, but here they have become secondary to O'Connor's “ardent” Catholicism. Noting that O'Connor was a Catholic reflected how her reviewers had learned, over a decade, to read *Wise Blood* and her other work in a different light which took a decade to shine more brightly.

Several reviews from British periodicals, written four years after O'Connor's death and after the reissue of *Wise Blood* in the United Kingdom, echo their American counterparts. The *Times Literary Supplement* called the reissue “an event warmly to be welcomed” and declared that O'Connor's Catholicism, “never intrusive in the stories, for once is dominant.”⁷⁹ What was originally only noticed once, in passing, had now become “dominant.” And while the *Manchester Guardian Weekly* noted that O'Connor's reputation in the United Kingdom was “subterranean, a bit special, limited to those who can appreciate the peculiar flavor of religious violence that pervades her work,” the reviewer did note O'Connor's “passion for ravaging a few

⁷⁷ Dennis Powers, “*Wise Blood* Repays a Second Reading,” *Oakland Tribune*, August 24, 1962, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 188.

⁷⁸ Dean Peerman, “Grotesquerie Plus,” *Christian Century* 80 (August 14, 1963), 1008.

⁷⁹ “Long Day's Preaching,” *Times Literary Supplement*, February 1, 1968, 101.

souls.”⁸⁰ The South also rose again here, although this time in qualified terms: “It is a work of strange beauty, totally original, set in a South as far removed from Tennessee Williams and his lachrymose cripples as it is possible to be. A tougher writer, O’Connor invested her human relics with a ferocious dignity.”⁸¹ Geography had become less a way to pigeonhole O’Connor than a way to help account for the “strange beauty” of her work and the degree to which she surpassed the expectations of a Southern writer.

Reviews are not, of course, the only means by which an author’s reputation is created and established. The visual artists responsible for illuminating the themes of an author’s work also affect one’s reputation, if, again, by “reputation” we mean the ways that an author’s artistic performance and thematic concerns are apprehended by various camps of readers. People do judge books by their covers, and covers are a means by which a writer’s reputation is built over time, since the artwork on them can reflect contemporary understandings of a writer’s style and themes. The most iconic cover art in American literature—Francis Cugat’s deep blue dreamscape for *The Great Gatsby*—has without question affected readers and critics who gained a sense of the style and substance of Fitzgerald’s novel through Cugat’s illustration. The same could be said for E. Michael Mitchell’s 1951 cover for *The Catcher in the Rye*, with its iconic carousel horse, Edward McKnight Kauffer’s 1952 design for *Invisible Man*, or a host of others.

The history of *Wise Blood*’s various covers parallels the novel’s critical reception: like the reviews, the covers range from vague to misleading to eventually representative of O’Connor’s thematic concerns. The early covers suggest that those charged with initially packaging the novel felt some of the same unease experienced by the original reviewers. The first edition of *Wise Blood* in 1952 features the title surrounded by warped concentric circles

⁸⁰ Paul Bailey, “Maimed Souls,” London *Observer*, February 11, 1968, 27, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 199.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

(Fig. 1); all a reader might infer about the novel is that it is strange or, perhaps, concerns hypnosis. O'Connor regarded the design as "very pretty" but also noted, "The jacket is lousy with me blown up on the back of it, looking like a refugee from deep thought."⁸² O'Connor's wisecrack here reflects her dislike of many clichés regarding authors: she laughed at the idea of writers as lone eccentrics and never thought that her photograph on anything would help sell it. "I hate like sin to have my picture taken," she wrote, "and most of them don't look much like me, or maybe they look like I'll look after I've been dead a couple of days."⁸³ Still, authors' photographs were a staple of dust jackets and O'Connor, especially as a new author, had to submit.

The British edition of *Wise Blood*, published by Neville Spearman in 1955, featured a drawing representing Hazel Motes looking heavenward, his hands folded in prayer, thus making the book look like it might have been written by an American Wodehouse (Fig. 2). There is no indication whatsoever of the novel's violence or dark comedy: the pink hues would, according to O'Connor, "stop the blindest Englishman in the thickest fog."⁸⁴ Such visual misrepresentation continued when the paperback was issued by another British house in 1960 (Fig. 3); O'Connor despised this cover, noting, "Sabbath is thereon turned into Marilyn Monroe in underclothes."⁸⁵ This cover, a blatant attempt to sell O'Connor's work in a way that eliminated any hint of its theological content was the one least indicative of the novel's themes: the "sin" mentioned over the title ("A brutal, passionate novel of sin and redemption in a Southern town") is not implied to be blasphemy, but one more immediately recognizable and salacious. One can imagine how

⁸² O'Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, April 1952, in *The Habit of Being*, 33.

⁸³ O'Connor to Janet McKane, 19 June 1963, in *The Habit of Being*, 524-25.

⁸⁴ O'Connor to Robert Giroux, 21 October, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 113.

⁸⁵ O'Connor to "A.," 17 September, 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 408.

disappointed the readers who purchased *Wise Blood* on the strength of this cover must have been. The 1962 reissue of the novel featured cover art by Milton Glaser (Fig. 4). This version better reflected the novel's tone and content: anyone noticing this edition, with its shadowy portrait of either Asa Hawks or Motes himself, would have a much better idea of the novel's grim content than could be discerned from earlier editions. When recently asked about this particular cover, Glaser, who would become one of the premiere graphic artists in the United States, responded, "While it depicts one of the characters from the book, it now almost seems generic to me. Although, as an object, it still retains a certain graphic impact."⁸⁶ Glaser later famously

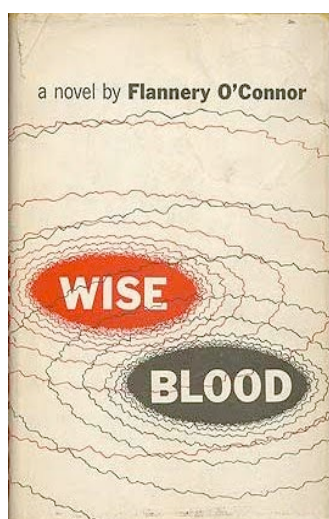


Figure 1

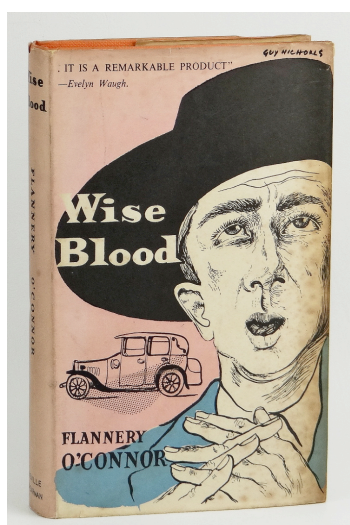


Figure 2

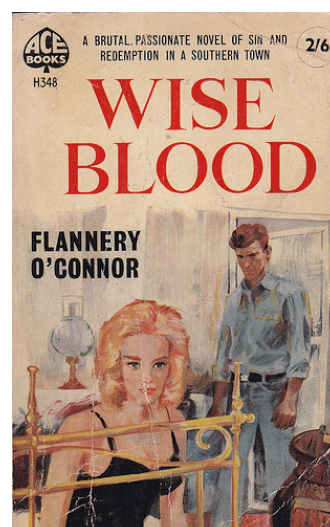


Figure 3

defined the logo as "the point of entry to the brand." Such a definition applies to his cover of *Wise Blood*, which serves as a point of entry to the novel's theme of spiritual blindness. Two years later saw the issue of *Three by Flannery O'Connor*, a collection that included *Wise Blood*; its cover, featuring a cartoon of Motes in his Essex with Sabbath's legs hanging over the side, seems to suggest a return to the kind of image offered by Neville Spearman but for the "CHURCH

⁸⁶ Milton Glaser, email message to author, October 17, 2012.

WITHOUT CHRIST” sign cleverly replacing the expected “JUST MARRIED” (Fig. 5). A later Signet reprint (Fig. 6) emphasized the rural setting of O’Connor’s works and suggested, with a font reminiscent of saloon signs or roadside diners, a cheerfulness and “down-hominess” that all of her work totally lacks. The road on this cover seems not to be the one promising endless persecution that Tarwater knows he must walk in *The Violent Bear It Away*.

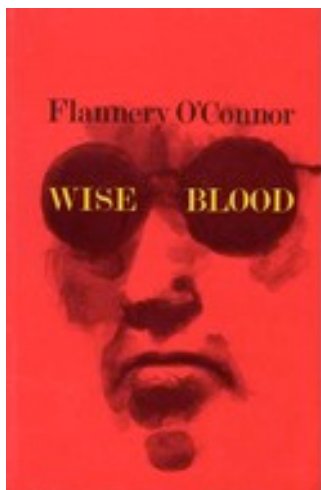


Figure 4

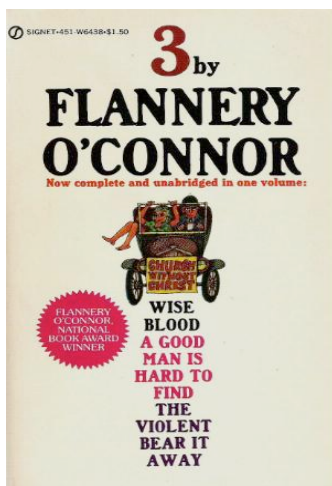


Figure 5

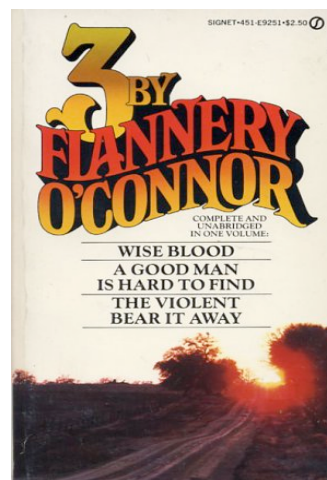


Figure 6

In 1990, Farrar, Straus and Giroux reissued paperback editions of several of O’Connor’s works and hired Canadian illustrator Roxanna Bikadoroff to illustrate their covers. Her cover of *Wise Blood* stands as the one most representative of O’Connor’s thematic concerns and artistic performance and most indicative of O’Connor’s reputation as an author of shocking *and* spiritual fiction (Fig. 7). When asked about her design, Bikadoroff explained how she arrived at her choice of image and why she felt it to be appropriate for the novel:

I wanted the covers to have simple, iconic images. Symbolic imagery is very much like an arrow or key that allows instant entry to the unconscious or collective unconscious; it is a different language than writing, but together they work on both sides of the brain at once and bring a union / understanding. O’Connor uses so much symbolism, too, it was only appropriate.

So I chose symbols that were universal, powerful. They had to have a twist which made them particular to the stories, though, and convey the essence of

the work or the main character. I stuck to symbols that had strong, biblical references, of course.

The heart with barbed wire is pretty obvious for *Wise Blood*. It echoes the crown of thorns and the sacred heart of Jesus, but also the barbed wire Motes wraps around his chest in his religious self-flagellation / penance.⁸⁷

Bikadoroff's cover, coupled with a blurb on the back by Brad Leithauser declaring, "No other major American writer of our century has constructed a fictional world so energetically and forthrightly charged by religious investigation,"⁸⁸ demonstrates the degree to which the understanding of *Wise Blood* in particular and O'Connor in general had changed over time. Her spiritual concerns, now blazoned on the cover of her first novel, had become more worthy of notice than the violence of her plots. Further indication of this change appears in a transcript of one of the Open Yale 2008 courses on American literature. The professor, Amy Hungerford, begins by directing her students to look at Bikadoroff's cover and then asking, "What does it look like to you?" When a student responds, "Is it the Sacred Heart?" Hungerford responds:

It's the Sacred Heart, yes. It's the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In Catholic iconography of a certain kind, the figure of Christ is shown usually parting His clothes and His flesh and showing you His Sacred Heart, which is usually crowned with flame and often encircled with thorns. So it's an image of Christ the suffering godhead: the very human, fleshly person who will part His own flesh in order to connect with, in order to redeem, the believer. So right in the packaging of this novel that we have today—this cover has changed over time—nevertheless, even today, that very Catholic iconography is right on the front of the cover. And when you see *Wise Blood*, that title, right below the Sacred Heart, you can't help but think of: well, this blood is somehow the blood of Christ. That's the kind of blood we're talking about. It's already entered a sort of metaphorical register, religious register, in the way this book is packaged.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Roxanna Bikadoroff, email message to author, October 14, 2012.

⁸⁸ Brad Leithauser, "A Nasty Dose of Orthodoxy," *The New Yorker* 64:38 (November 7, 1988), 154.

⁸⁹ Amy Hungerford, "The American Novel Since 1945: Lecture 3 Transcript," Open Yale, <http://www.core.org.cn/mirrors/Yale/yale/oyc.yale.edu/english/american-novel-since-1945/content/transcripts/transcript-3-flannery-oconnor-wise-blood.htm> (accessed October 16, 2012).

O'Connor's reputation as a Catholic writer has taken root so firmly as to be mentioned at the start of a lecture before beginning any deeper analysis. The "register" Hungerford mentions is one that has been reshaped by criticism, publishers, and graphic designers since 1952.

The most recent American paperback edition (2007) features a golden cross against a black background with the novel's title written in stately capitals (Fig. 8), Leithauser's blurb at the bottom, and the FS&G logo on the side as an indicator of the book's literary pedigree; the 2008 Faber & Faber cover features a cross-topped church under a sweeping sky (Fig. 9).

O'Connor's reputation as a Catholic novelist is now taken for granted, but publishers, like reviewers, took their time before they allowed themselves to acknowledge—rather than hide or avoid—this fact.

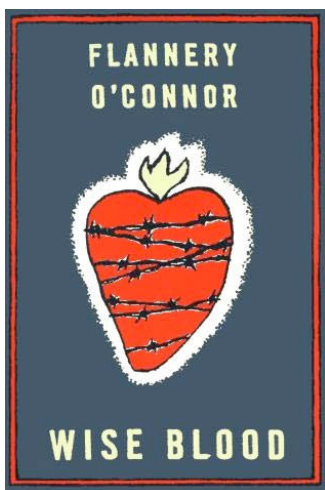


Figure 7

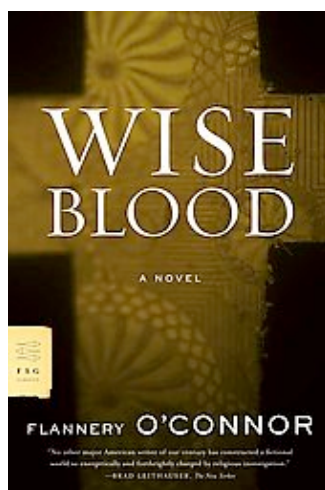


Figure 8



Figure 9

In an angry letter to John Selby, her original editor at Rinehart who held an option on *Wise Blood* and who, according to O'Connor, wanted to "train it into a conventional novel," O'Connor declared:

I am not writing a conventional novel, and I think that the quality of the novel I write will derive precisely from the peculiarity or aloneness, if you will, of the experience I write from...The finished book will be just as odd if not odder than

the nine chapters you have now. The question is: is Rinehart interested in publishing this kind of novel?⁹⁰

O'Connor knew what it took many readers ten years (and two other works by O'Connor) to learn: "this kind of novel" could simply not be read as a conventional one in which issues are neatly resolved, where geography is artistic destiny, or where violence was more sensational than suggestive of a spiritual *agon*. But one must not blame these reviewers or accuse them of benighted judgment: like Motes, they needed to be jolted out of their figurative blindness. That jolt was supplied by O'Connor herself, with the 1955 publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and that of *The Violent Bear It Away* in 1960.

⁹⁰ O'Connor to John Selby, 18 February 1949, in *The Habit of Being*, 10.

CHAPTER 2

The “Discovery” of O’Connor’s Catholicism: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and The Violent Bear It Away*

Near the end of *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, James Boswell offers one of many scenes in which Johnson expresses his fear of death:

Dr. Johnson surprised [Mr. Henderson] not a little, by acknowledging with a look of horror, that he was much oppressed by the fear of death. The amiable Dr. Adams suggested that God was infinitely good. *Johnson*: “That he is infinitely good, as far as the perfection of his nature will allow, I certainly believe; but it is necessary for good upon the whole, that individuals should be punished. As to an *individual*, therefore, he is not infinitely good; and as I cannot be *sure* that I have fulfilled the conditions on which salvation is granted, I am afraid I may be one of those who shall be damned”(looking dismally). *Dr. Adams*: “What do you mean by damned?” *Johnson* (passionately and loudly): “Sent to Hell, Sir, and punished everlastingly.” *Dr. Adams*: “I don’t believe that doctrine.” *Johnson*: “Hold, Sir; do you believe that some will be punished at all?” *Dr. Adams*: “Being excluded from Heaven will be a punishment; yet there may be no great positive suffering.” *Johnson*: “Well, Sir; but if you admit any degree of punishment, there is an end of your argument for infinite goodness simply considered; for, infinite goodness would inflict no punishment whatever. There is not infinite goodness physically considered; morally there is.” *Boswell*: “But may not a man attain to such a degree of hope as not to be uneasy from the fear of death?” *Johnson*: “A man may have such a degree of hope as to keep him quiet. You see I am not quiet, from the vehemence with which I talk; but I do not despair.” *Mrs. Adams*: “You seem, Sir, to forget the merits of our Redeemer.” *Johnson*: “Madam, I do not forget the merits of my Redeemer; but my Redeemer has said that he will set some on his right hand and some on his left.” He was in gloomy agitation, and said, “I’ll have no more on’t.”¹

A reader can empathize with the Adamses, trying to console the Great Cham in the final year of his life. But the point of Boswell’s anecdote is Johnson’s clear thinking about damnation and refusal to entertain what he saw as spiritual sophistry. To Johnson, all who believe in “damnation” know, or should know, exactly what it entails. As O’Connor would note in a 1955 letter, “The Truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it.”²

¹ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 929.

² O’Connor to Betty Hester, 6 September 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 100.

Like Dr. Adams when asking Johnson to define “damnation,” many reviewers, even after *Wise Blood*, could not believe O’Connor took the spiritual issues she explored in her work as seriously, as definitively, and as absolutely she did. Thus, “The River” is often described as “tragic,” rather than as a treatment of the mystery of baptism and the death of the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is described as an act of random savagery, rather than an evil man’s reaction to the presence of grace.³ Rueben Brower’s famous definition of “irony”—“saying one thing and meaning another”—was assumed by many readers to be at work here and part of what critics today might call O’Connor’s “project.”

But other readers in the ten years between the two editions of *Wise Blood* came to recognize that O’Connor did take her subjects—such as sin, grace, and salvation—quite seriously and was as steadfast in her moral reasoning as Johnson was in his. The “satire” of which reviewers spoke when reviewing *Wise Blood* became replaced with a growing awareness (and, sometimes, unease) that, like Johnson, O’Connor viewed the truth as fixed, absolute, and quite beyond human equivocation. In his biography of O’Connor, Jonathan Rogers notes, “As shocking as the grotesqueries in her fiction are, none is so shocking as the realization that they are marshaled in the service of a Catholic orthodoxy that the author submits to—or, in any case, wishes to submit to—without the least trace of ironic detachment.”⁴ Or, as O’Connor famously cracked when Mary McCarthy described the Eucharist as a “pretty good” symbol of Christ, “Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it.”⁵ Others could have their irony. O’Connor had her

³ Many of my own students have, at first glance, regarded “The River” as some kind of “warning” against fundamentalism and claimed that the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in their words, “got what she deserved.”

⁴ Jonathan Rogers, *The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Biography of Flannery O’Connor* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2012), 105-6.

⁵ Gooch, 174.

orthodoxy, an orthodoxy which might now be acknowledged but which was not so obvious to her early readers.

A full accounting for this shift in terms of reviewers' perceptions is, obviously, impossible: one cannot assume some kind of change in her readers' hearts that would explain their growing acceptance of her chief thematic concerns, nor is it the proper role of the historian to praise or chide reviewers for their presumed insight or benightedness. One can, however, examine and characterize the reviewers' reading habits as they encountered *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) and show how these reviewers established O'Connor's present reputation as a writer exploring Catholic themes. One can also locate those moments in her reception history where lone readers, like a voice crying in the wilderness, announced for the first time what we now take for granted.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Peter J. Rabinowitz has catalogued what he calls "rules of notice": ways in which readers highlight various pieces of data in order to begin making sense of a text. But as an element is noticed, some significance needs to be attached to it. Thus, many reviewers early in O'Connor's career noticed her age, gender, and region and assigned significance to these, usually as obstacles which O'Connor had or had not overcome. Once these readers decided *what* to notice about the author or about her work, they decided *how* to notice it, relying on their own values and assumptions to inform them what a piece of biographical or textual data might mean. For example, Hulga's wooden leg in "Good Country People" is clearly noticed as important by even the most superficial reader; the significance of this fact is determined by how the reader responds to O'Connor's cues and suggestions. But the author, Rabinowitz argues, also needs to make assumptions about her readers' understanding of what is significant in a text:

An author has, in most cases, no firm knowledge of the actual readers who will pick up his or her book. Yet he or she cannot begin to fill up a blank page without making assumptions about the readers' beliefs, knowledge, and familiarity with conventions. As a result, authors are forced to guess; they design their books rhetorically for some more or less *hypothetical* audience, which I call the *authorial audience*. Artistic choices are based upon these assumptions—conscious or unconscious—about readers, and to a certain extent, artistic success depends on their shrewdness, on the degree to which actual and authorial audience overlap.⁶

In other words, the authorial audience is the hypothetical reader to whom a work of fiction is addressed; this reader will most often be imagined by writers as one who shares a number of his or her values and assumptions. John Bunyan assumed he and his authorial audience shared a number of opinions regarding the journey from this world to that which is to come, just as Dashiell Hammett assumed that he could, to engineer the surprise at the end of *The Maltese Falcon*, exploit his authorial audience's opinions about the dangerous nature of beautiful women, especially when they appeared in pulp novels. Of course, the actual audience might be different from the authorial one and is not bound in any way to read the work as the author imagined it would be. One could imagine, for example, an (admittedly unsophisticated) reader of *The Time Machine* breaking from Wells' authorial audience, dismissing the novel as scientifically impossible or as having nothing to say about social class in Edwardian England. One could similarly imagine a reader breaking from Salinger's authorial audience, unsympathetic to Holden Caulfield and finding Salinger's novel to be, like its protagonist, repetitive and dull. The authorial audience is as much a creation of the writer's imagination as the fiction itself, but the actual audience can read and respond however it pleases.

When Rabinowitz states that "artistic success" depends on "the degree to which actual and authorial audience overlap," he is suggesting that one mark of artistic success is the degree to which an author has managed to provide his or her readers with a vision of the world that

⁶ Rabinowitz, 21. Emphasis in original.

complements how they imagine their own and that this vision is built upon at least some shared assumptions between author and reader. For example, those whose opinions of Gary Gilmore resemble those of Norman Mailer will be more likely to label *The Executioner's Song* an “artistic success” than those whose opinions of Gilmore are directly opposed to Mailer’s. Of course, one of Mailer’s goals is to change his readers’ assumptions on this subject, but if the reader does not budge in his detestation of Gilmore, it is difficult to imagine him or her applauding Mailer’s work as anything more than biased, however engaging, reportage. One value of Rabinowitz’s work lies in its use as a tool for investigating why certain works are praised and others are not: the degree to which readers’ experiences mirror those of the authorial audience, the collection of “presuppositions upon which a text is built,”⁷ often suggests the degree to which individual readers will praise or condemn a writer’s artistic performance.

Applying Rabinowitz’s ideas to a reception study is useful because doing so forces the historian first to discern and describe his or her subject’s authorial audience and then to determine the degree to which readers in the actual audience accepted or resisted reading in an authorially imagined manner. Completing these tasks can allow the historian to write a reception history that accounts for changes in reading habits, rather than one that simply records who-liked-what-when. So, who comprised O’Connor’s authorial audience? What hypothetical readers did she have in mind as she wrote? To what values and assumptions did she hope to appeal when deciding that, in “The River,” Harry Ashfield would seek a place where he “counted,” or that, in “The Artificial Nigger,” Mr. Head and Nelson would be united by a “monument to another’s victory that brought them together in their common defeat?”⁸ Creating

⁷ Ibid., 194.

⁸ O’Connor, “The Artificial Nigger,” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977), 125.

a sketch of O'Connor's authorial audience is a particularly useful method for examining the shift in critical opinion that occurred between the first (1952) and second (1962) editions of *Wise Blood*. In terms of O'Connor's initial reception, for example, a reader who does not believe in sin will have a profoundly different reaction to *Wise Blood* than one who does. An examination of the reception of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *The Violent Bear It Away* suggests that readers gradually understood the assumptions inherent in O'Connor's authorial audience, or that they at least began to recognize the assumptions on which the authorial audience was built. Once they did, the Catholic themes of her work became apparent.

In a 1955 letter to Robie Macauley, O'Connor thanked him for his kind words about her stories and remarked, "I get some letters from people I might have created myself."⁹ Her joke reveals her impatience with those who twisted her works to suit assumptions that she did not share—or, as was usually the case, read her fiction in ways of which she strongly disapproved. For example, after reading William Sessions' reaction to *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor wrote him that the book failed for him because he saw everything, even the fork of a tree, in terms of sexual symbols—a way of reading she found trendy, ridiculous, and counterintuitive:

Your criticism sounds to me as if you have read too many critical books and are too smart in an artificial, destructive, and very limited way...The Freudian technique can be applied to anything at all with...ridiculous results. The fork in the tree! My Lord, Billy, recover your simplicity. You ain't in Manhattan.¹⁰

Similarly, a year after her letter to Sessions, O'Connor received an inquiry from a professor of English regarding "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" in which he claimed, on behalf of three professors and ninety students, that Bailey only imagines the appearance of the Misfit and that the entire second half of the story is part of Bailey's reverie. O'Connor replied that she found

⁹ O'Connor to Robie Macauley, 18 May 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 62.

¹⁰ O'Connor to William Sessions, 13 September 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 407.

such a reading “fantastic and about as far from my intentions as it could get to be,” since such a “trick” would make the story one concerning “abnormal psychology,” a subject in which she was firmly “not interested.”¹¹ The end of this letter, like her reply to Sessions, illuminates her assumptions about good readers through her mockery of bad ones:

If teachers are in the habit of approaching a story as if it were a research problem for which any answer is believable so long as it is not obvious, then I think students will never learn to enjoy fiction. Too much interpretation is certainly worse than too little, and where feeling for a story is absent, theory will not supply it.

O'Connor closed with, “My tone is not meant to be obnoxious. I am in a state of shock,” reflecting her disbelief in the idea that something as physical and horrifying as the Misfit’s actions could be explained away as a dream in which Bailey figuratively “kills” his mother. Reading habits such as these, in which readers “approach a story as if it were a problem in algebra,” seeking to “find X [so] when they find X they can dismiss the rest of it,”¹² not only irritated O'Connor but outraged her assumptions about fiction and the life it reflected. Those who concocted outlandish interpretations, such as the reviewer for *Commentary* who found *The Violent Bear It Away* a novel about homosexual incest,¹³ were, to O'Connor, beyond the critical pale: “When you have a generation of students who are being taught to think like that, there’s nothing to do but wait for another generation to come along and hope it won’t be worse.”¹⁴ The

¹¹ O'Connor to a Professor of English, 28 March 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 437.

¹² O'Connor, quoted in *Recent Southern Fiction: A Panel Discussion*, in the *Bulletin of Wesleyan College*, January 1961. Reprinted in *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), 73-74.

¹³ See Algene Ballif, “A Southern Allegory,” *Commentary* 30 (October 1960): 358-62, where Ballif states, “What seems to lie at the heart of all this dualism and image-splitting and spiritual tug-of-war is an elaborate fantasy of what one can call only homosexual incest. The language of the novel is penetrated with images that suggest it.” In *The Contemporary Reviews*, 151.

¹⁴ O'Connor to John Hawkes, 28 November 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 457.

phrase “think like that,” in this discussion, can be reread for our purposes as “not reading as a member of O’Connor’s authorial audience to any degree.”

Thus, one way to determine O’Connor’s authorial, imagined audience is to examine its opposite: a collection of readers too-clever-by-half who sought to explain away her fiction’s mysteries, many of them spiritual, with “psychoanalytic” readings or a hunt for symbols. One reviewer of *The Violent Bear It Away*, for example, relied on psychiatric jargon to help him contain the mysteries of the plot, describing Mason, Tarwater, and Rayber as “an obsessive psychotic, a paranoiac delinquent, and a fanatically monomaniac.”¹⁵ When O’Connor was asked by a professor at Wesleyan about the “significance” of the Misfit’s hat, she replied, “To cover his head.”¹⁶ Mason Tarwater rails against his nephew for trying to reduce God to a number; O’Connor had little patience for readers who tried to read in any similarly reductive manner and who viewed fiction as an intellectual parlor game in which the players won by offering the most edgy interpretations. O’Connor never saw her works as being wholly enclosed in irony-bestowing quotation marks.

However, to complicate matters, any writer may have more than one authorial audience in mind as he or she creates a work of fiction. One might simplistically assume that O’Connor’s authorial audience was composed of other Christians and that O’Connor imagined herself writing to them in the spirit of confirming what they already believed. However, just as her fiction often presented surprising choices of characters with which to dramatize the action of grace,¹⁷ her idea of an audience was also unexpected: she never imagined that she was writing only to haloed

¹⁵ Martin A. Sherwood, “Unlimited Prophets,” *Montreal Gazette*, June 4, 1960, 39. Sherwood also describes Tarwater’s rape as a “rather unfortunate experience with a homosexual,” rather than the spiritual trigger that the novel suggests it is. In *The Contemporary Reviews*, 145-46.

¹⁶ O’Connor to Dr. T. R. Spivey, 25 May 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 334.

¹⁷ In a letter to Betty Hester, O’Connor explained, “All of my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it.” O’Connor to Betty Hester, 4 April 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 275.

readers, but in fact largely to those who would deny the existence of halos in the first place. In fact, a study of O'Connor's letters and lectures reveals that O'Connor also imagined a second authorial audience defined by what its members did not believe, rather than what they did. "My audience," she wrote shortly after the publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, "are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for."¹⁸

O'Connor understood that her fiction would be read by "a public with a predisposition to believe the opposite"¹⁹ and viewed one of her primary challenges as dramatizing the action of grace and redemption to those who, having eyes, saw not and having ears, heard not: as she articulated her artistic challenge in a 1955 letter, "How are you going to make such things clear to people who don't believe in God?"²⁰ O'Connor thought her stories and novels were sometimes met with confusion or scorn because their themes were ones that readers had dismissed as archaic: she sympathized with John Hawkes' task of "speaking to an audience which does not believe in evil"²¹ and complained to her former teacher, Andrew Lytle, that "The River" would be panned because "baptism is just another idiocy to the general reader."²² O'Connor imagined her audience as composed not only of others who shared her convictions, which made expressing these convictions in her art more challenging: "Part of the difficulty of all this," she explained, "is that you write for an audience who doesn't know what grace is and who doesn't recognize it when they see it."²³

¹⁸ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 2 August 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 92.

¹⁹ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 28 August 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 97.

²⁰ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 25 November 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 118.

²¹ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 31 October 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 357.

²² O'Connor to Andrew Lytle, 4 February 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 373.

²³ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 4 April 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 275.

For a reader to fully appreciate her fiction, O'Connor assumed that he or she had to be capable of at least entertaining the idea that grace and God were real; such readers might be called the "genuine" (or "redeemed") authorial audience. But there was also this second, rival audience at hand that she strove to reach in her fiction who can be called the "ironic" authorial audience. This matter of diverse audiences made all the difference in the building of her literary reputation: for example, the "genuine" authorial readers of *The Violent Bear It Away* responded to the subject of prophecy in a way almost uniformly opposed to that of the "ironic" authorial audience. As one reviewer noted with regard to that novel, "What reaction its theme provokes may be a matter not of philosophy but of temperament."²⁴ Both of these audiences had great effects on the direction which O'Connor's reputation took as her first collection of stories and second novel were published.

Perhaps the clearest sense of O'Connor's frustration with much of the philosophy and temperament of her ironic audience can be gleaned from a letter she wrote in 1958 to Ted Spivey, a professor of literature whom she saw as a fellow traveler through a contemporary vale of nihilism:

I suppose what bothers us so much about writing about the return of modern people to a sense of the Holy Spirit is that the religious sense has been bred out of them in the kind of society we've lived in since the 18th century. And it's bred out of them double quick now by the religious substitutes for religion. There's nowhere to latch on to, in the characters or the audience. If there were in the public just a slight sense of ordinary theology (much less crisis theology), if they only believed at least that God has the power to do certain things. There is no sense of the power of God that could produce the Incarnation and the Resurrection. They are all so busy explaining away the virgin birth and such things, reducing everything to human proportions that in time they lose even the sense of the human itself, what they were aiming to reduce everything to. As for fiction, the meaning of a piece of fiction only begins where everything psychological and sociological has been explained.²⁵

²⁴ Doris Betts, "Total Commitment to Christian Frame," *Houston Post*, March 17, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 118.

O'Connor's ironic audience had difficulty in allowing spiritual mysteries to be viewed as mysterious. Tom T. Shiftlet may be a scoundrel, but he is firmly in O'Connor's camp when he tells Lucynell Crater that a surgeon examining the human heart still cannot fathom its depths: "Why, if he was to take that knife and cut into every corner of it, he still wouldn't know no more than you or me."²⁶ The challenge presented by O'Connor's actual audience was that many of its ironic members did not share her convictions about the spiritual mysteries she sought to explore. The heart was only a pump. But the record shows that the two authorial audiences, genuine and ironic, were always in mind as she composed her fiction. Each was as important to her as the other.

O'Connor never viewed her art as a means of preaching to the choir. She had as little regard for unskilled Catholic readers, even when they were cheerful members of the genuine authorial audience, as she did with secular ones: she once described the "average Catholic reader" as a "Militant Moron."²⁷ And when asked by a student at Troy State to explain "just what enlightenment" O'Connor wanted her readers to gain from her stories, O'Connor fumed to Cecil Dawkins, "This is the kind of letter that leaves me beyond exasperation...Every story is a frog in a bottle to them."²⁸ To O'Connor, the purpose of her fiction was not to proselytize; she never saw herself as writing *apologias* or Biblical exegeses. O'Connor saw her art as a way to dramatize and share what she described as her "anagogical vision," the "kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or situation."²⁹ The term, usually used to

²⁵ O'Connor to Dr. T. R. Spivey, 19 October 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 299-300.

²⁶ O'Connor, "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 54.

²⁷ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 12 November 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 179.

²⁸ O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 13 January 1963, in *The Habit of Being*, 505.

describe a way of reading Scripture that illuminates the intersection of human and Divine, was one O'Connor found useful as a means of stating her artistic aims. She told a group of students at Emory University in 1957:

The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily the educated mind, but it is at all times the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery.³⁰

To O'Connor, the mystery of the world was as much a part of it as its physicality, and the writer's aim was to make his or her readers contemplate the mystery that she viewed the "modern world" as trying to "eliminate."³¹ "I'm always highly irritated," she explained in the same lecture, "by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it's very shocking to the system."³² T. S. Eliot's claim that "human kind cannot bear very much reality" is one in which O'Connor believed and which she explored in her fiction. It is also one that some of her more resistant, ironic readers proved with their reactions to her work.

A reconstruction of O'Connor's ironic authorial audience helps a reader better understand the rationale behind her famous remark regarding her artistic technique of shocking the reader out of his or her complacency: "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."³³ O'Connor so often employed shocking and violent scenes in her work because she had such a clear sense of what she needed to do in order to get her readers

²⁹ O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, 72.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

³¹ O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," in *Mystery and Manners*, 145.

³² O'Connor, "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," 78.

³³ O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, 34.

to even entertain the mysteries that inform and propel her fiction. As she told an *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* reporter in 1960:

Not every writer of fiction feels that he has to shock to get through to the average reader. I believe that that “average” reader, however, is a good deal below average. People say with considerable satisfaction, “Oh, I’m an average reader,” when the fact is they never learned to read in the first place and probably never will.³⁴

Imagining O’Connor’s two authorial audiences while examining the original reviews of *A Good Man is Hard to Find* and *The Violent Bear it Away* allows one to judge the degree to which O’Connor’s readers were as she imagined them and determine to what extent her authorial audiences matched the actual ones who read her work. One can read the reviews of this period as implicit statements about what constituted quality fiction and whether her original, actual audiences thought that O’Connor was producing any. One can also, at this remove in time, learn more about how her literary reputation changed as a function of the degree to which her authorial and actual audiences overlapped.

Lest quotations by O’Connor like those above make her seem only annoyed with or even contemptuous of her readers, however, three points should be reviewed. First, the ironic audience who “thinks God is dead” was, again, not the only one O’Connor had in mind as she wrote; she obviously imagined other readers who would recognize that Mr. Head experiences the gift of divine mercy or that the smooth-talking stranger who speaks to Tarwater is not a symptom of schizophrenia. O’Connor did not imagine herself writing *only* to those who thought God was dead. Second, the existence of an ironic audience was seen by O’Connor as a spur to producing higher quality work. As she wrote in “The Church and the Fiction Writer”:

The Catholic who does not write for a limited circle of fellow Catholics will in all probability consider that, since this is his vision, he is writing for a hostile

³⁴ Margaret Turner, “Visit to Flannery O’Connor Proves a Novel Experience,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 29, 1960, G2, in *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*, 42-43.

audience, and he will be more than ever concerned to have his work stand on its own two feet and be complete and self-sufficient and impregnable in its own right.³⁵

Finally, O'Connor fully recognized the need for readers and knew that an author without regard for her readers was employed in a game of solitaire: "Success means *being heard*... You may write for the joy of it, but the act of writing is not complete in itself. It has its end in its audience."³⁶ And the members of this audience, regardless of their number, who engaged themselves with the ideas that O'Connor presented embodied her work's success. "A few readers go a long way when they're the right kind. There are so many of the other kind."³⁷ Like a good man, a good reader was hard to find—but not impossible.

A Good Man is Hard to Find

A perusal of the original reviews of O'Connor's first collection of stories from 1955 reveals many of the same approaches, observations, and "rules of notice" that surfaced three years earlier with *Wise Blood*. O'Connor's age was still worthy of notice, as when James Greene in *Commonweal* described her as "scarcely thirty years old"³⁸ or when Granville Hicks stated, "If there is a young writer—Miss O'Connor is 30—who has given clearer power of originality and thinking, I cannot think who it is."³⁹ Likewise, the Southern accents of her work were highlighted and, as earlier, made an object of fun: one reviewer described her fiction as "*Grand*

³⁵ O'Connor, "The Church and the Fiction Writer," 146.

³⁶ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 9 December 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 458. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ Betsy Lochridge, "An Afternoon with Flannery O'Connor," *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, November 1, 1959, 38-40, in *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, 39.

³⁸ James Greene, "The Comic and the Sad," *Commonweal* 62 (July 22, 1955): 404, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 43.

³⁹ Granville Hicks, "A Belated Tribute to Short Stories by Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor," *New Leader* 38 (August 15, 1955), 17, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 45.

Guignol with hominy grits”⁴⁰ while another observed, less playfully, “The chance of lower middle-class Southerners reading anything at all between hard covers is pretty slim.”⁴¹ But many reviewers also noted that the South was more than a regionalistic Skinner box: the geographic setting of O’Connor’s work was still emphasized by reviewers, but they also noted that O’Connor was not of “the mint julep circuit.”⁴² In fact, a number of reviews suggest that many readers thought that the highest praise to give a Southern writer was to say that her work transcended its setting and that “Here in rural miniature are the primary intuitions of man.”⁴³ A reviewer from *Harper’s Bazaar* stated, “Flannery O’Connor writes of the South, but ‘regional’ is not the word for her writing”⁴⁴ and Fred Bornhauser, in *Shenandoah*, stated that O’Connor’s stories take place in a “terrifyingly familiar” world that is not Georgia as much as “microcosmically The Universe.”⁴⁵ Many reviews even shared a level of near-surprise that fiction set in the South could illuminate life in other places. For example, writing in the *Savannah Morning News*, Ben W. Griffith Jr. stated:

One feels as if the incidents of these stories occurred in any region on earth they would immediately be absorbed into the folklore of that area and be told and retold eternally on front porches and back fences. These stories, in short, have

⁴⁰ Robert Martin Adams, “Fiction Chronicle,” *Hudson Review* (Winter, 1956): 627, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 66.

⁴¹ John Cook Wyllie, “The Unscented South,” *Saturday Review*, June 4, 1955, 15, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 33.

⁴² Unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Grail* 38 (January 1956), 59, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 64.

⁴³ Greene, “The Comic and the Sad,” 43.

⁴⁴ Unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Harper’s Bazaar* (July, 1955), 72, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 41.

⁴⁵ Fred Bornhauser, “Book Reviews: Flannery O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *The Bride of Innisfallen*,” *Shenandoah* 7 (Autumn 1955): 71-81, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 51.

universality and depth in their narrative elements alone... These stories have humor, characterizations, freshness, and universality.⁴⁶

One reviewer went so far as to claim that O'Connor now offered readers "a fiery rejecting of Bible Beltism," which he described as "small, mean minds and small, mean ways."⁴⁷

O'Connor's South was still viewed by many reviewers as a place "where vision and understanding often extend hardly beyond one's individual fence rails,"⁴⁸ but there was a growing consensus that "the Southern locale in no way gives the stories a provincial bias."⁴⁹

Critical recognition that the issues of O'Connor's fiction were not confined to the South was an important development in both her growing reputation as more than a local hero and appeal to her authorial audiences, both genuine and ironic.

Perhaps the most surprising feature of the original reviews to later readers is that the title story—now universally viewed as her signature work and the one that best reflects her thematic concerns and artistic performance⁵⁰—was often disparaged, misread, or simply ignored. One reviewer stated that the story "has serious artistic defects,"⁵¹ while another explained, erroneously, "The 'good man' of the title story" is "an escaped murderer who casually dispatches

⁴⁶ Ben W. Griffith, Jr., "Stories of Gifted Writer Acquire Stature of Myths," *Savannah Morning News* (June 5, 1955), sec. 6, p. 60, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 34.

⁴⁷ Riley Hughes, "New Books," *Catholic World* 182 (October 1955), 67, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 46.

⁴⁸ John A. Lynch, "Isolated World," *Today* (October 11, 1955), 31, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 46-48.

⁴⁹ Unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *U. S. Quarterly Book Review* 11 (December 1955), 472, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 62.

⁵⁰ See, for example, Robert Giroux's 1972 introduction to *The Collected Stories*, where he calls it a "masterpiece of a story" and Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* where he notes that, in 1955, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was "being canonized as her greatest story." See Robert Giroux, introduction to *Flannery O'Connor: The Collected Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), xii and Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 236.

⁵¹ John Cook Wyllie, "The Unscented South," 33.

six people.”⁵² Critics often described the story as “one of multiple tragedy”⁵³ and pointed out that the Misfit and his men kill all six members of Bailey’s family. Counting the bodies was apparently easier than wrestling with the Misfit’s ideas about whether or not Jesus should have raised the dead. All that many reviewers could say about the story was that it was “tragic and terrible,”⁵⁴ as if the gunshots, and not the reasons behind them, were at the heart of O’Connor’s thematic concerns. (The repeated use of “tragic” in these reviews often suggests that critics were responding to the ages and number of the victims, rather than the meaning of their deaths.) The unnamed reviewer for *Time* simply described the murders, noting that the characters “run into three escaped convicts who rob and shoot the lot, the babbling old featherwit last of all.”⁵⁵ That this reviewer saw no mystery or anything worth notice in the grandmother’s action of reaching out to the Misfit nor in the application of the Misfit’s sardonic eulogy for her (“She would have been a good woman if it had been someone there to shoot her every minute of her life”⁵⁶) to humanity in general suggests the degree to which O’Connor was right in her assumptions about some members of her ironic authorial audience; she remarked that this particular review “nearly gave me apoplexy.”⁵⁷

⁵² Francis J. Ullrich, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Best Sellers*, June 15, 1955, 59, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 40.

⁵³ Fanny Butcher, “Ten Pokes in the Ribs with a Poisoned Dart,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine of Books* (July 3, 1955), sec. 4, p. 3, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 42.

⁵⁴ Susan Myrick, “New Stories of Georgia Farm Life: O’Connor Book Rates with the Best,” *Macon Telegraph*, May 26, 1955, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 31.

⁵⁵ “Such Nice People,” *Time*, June 6, 1955, 114.

⁵⁶ O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 22.

⁵⁷ O’Connor to Ben Griffith, 9 July 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 89.

Many reviewers instead found “The Displaced Person” to be the collection’s strongest work. The *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* called it “the finest in the book,”⁵⁸ *Today* called it “the most successful story,”⁵⁹ the *Virginia Quarterly* called it the “most complex story”⁶⁰ in the collection, and the *Sewanee Review* called it the “most ambitious story”⁶¹ of the lot. Others praised it even more highly in Aristotelian terms: a reviewer for *Best Sellers* called it “the nearest to a classic tragedy of all the collection of ten”⁶² and another called it “a classic-tragedy of a man who disturbed his neighbors by minding his own business.”⁶³ Reviewers’ praise of “The Displaced Person” is the closest thing to a critical consensus of O’Connor’s artistic performance to be found in her early career. That “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is now much more widely anthologized and associated with O’Connor is a fact of literary life that modern critics may take for granted, but upon its first release in this collection, the story did not strike many reviewers as superior to its nine companion pieces.

The question remains why so many of the collection’s initial readers viewed “The Displaced Person” as having “greater strength and deeper implications than any of the others.”⁶⁴ One possibility is that, unlike the title story, “The Displaced Person” is more neatly allegorical. The links between the title character, Mr. Guizac, and Christ are obvious: O’Connor even has

⁵⁸ Sylvia Stallings, “Flannery O’Connor: A New, Shining Talent Among Our Storytellers,” *New York Herald Tribune Book Review*, June 5, 1955, 1, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 36.

⁵⁹ Lynch, “Isolated World,” 46.

⁶⁰ Unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Virginia Quarterly Review* 31 (Autumn 1955): ci, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 59.

⁶¹ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “Two Ladies of the South,” *Sewanee Review* 63 (Autumn 1955): 680, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 61.

⁶² Ullrich, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 40.

⁶³ Unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Grail*, 64.

⁶⁴ Butcher, “Ten Pokes in the Ribs with a Poisoned Dart,” 42.

Mrs. McIntyre remark, “Christ was just another D.P.,”⁶⁵ almost as a means to prompt the reader. Similarly, Guizac’s horrifying death—and Mrs. McIntyre’s complicity in it—smacks more of the story of the Paschal lamb, especially since Guizac has been an advocate of loving one’s neighbor when dealing with the blatantly racist Mrs. McIntyre. This is not to imply that the allegory of the sacrificed innocent is ineffective, only that it is easily accessible to first-time readers. “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” however, is a story more difficult to follow and categorize at first glance. It begins as a social comedy, with the stock character of the irritating, know-it-all grandmother presented as an easy target—but once Bailey’s car flips on its back, the characters and the reader are no longer in the driver’s seat. What began as a recognizable joke about a meddling old lady becomes a deathly-serious disquisition on Christ, punishment, sin, and grace and the grandmother becomes not an object of social ridicule but a fellow human being. The Misfit and O’Connor challenge and unsettle both the delirious grandmother and the unsuspecting reader. In “The Displaced Person,” the reader is flattered into recognizing Guizac’s goodness; in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” the reader is tricked by having his or her assumptions upended in a moment of violence. This technique of luring her reader into making a number of literary and moral assumptions, only to have them violently shaken, was one that O’Connor would use again and again in her best work: one only needs to recall the endings of “Everything that Rises Must Converge” or “Revelation” as later examples. In the *Sewanee Review*, Louis D. Rubin, Jr. noted that while writers like Erskine Caldwell had social aims and axes to grind, “Flannery O’Connor has no such intention, no such simple approach to people.”⁶⁶ But a simple approach may have been what many reviewers wanted, which is why they had more difficulty with the Misfit than with the displaced person.

⁶⁵ O’Connor, “The Displaced Person,” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 243.

⁶⁶ Rubin, “Two Ladies of the South,” 60.

Still, some readers did argue—in what were becoming longer and more sophisticated evaluations of O'Connor's work—that the title, as Thomas H. Carter observed, “states quite literally the burden of the book.”⁶⁷ As with *Wise Blood*, a reviewer for *Shenandoah* offered perhaps the most lucid explanation of O'Connor's technique: in his review, Fred Bornhauser claimed that the collection's title would be perfect even without the eponymous story and that titles such as “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and “Good Country People” help “illuminate in inverse situations the ethos which is the absolute center of gravity”⁶⁸ in O'Connor's stories. Yet it was Robert Giroux—not O'Connor—who named the collection after the work that had impressed him most as he readied O'Connor's stories for publication.⁶⁹ O'Connor actually regarded “The Artificial Nigger” as “my favorite and probably the best thing I'll ever write”⁷⁰ but she trusted Giroux and followed his instincts. Of course, one cannot imagine a collection named after O'Connor's favorite story selling well or without great controversy even in 1955. In fact, when the collection was published in the United Kingdom two years later under the title *The Artificial Nigger*, O'Connor was upset about the title change.⁷¹ Giroux's naming of the collection has helped cement the title story as O'Connor's most representative work and O'Connor as a writer who, in the words of one reviewer, relies on

⁶⁷ Thomas H. Carter, “Rhetoric and Southern Landscapes,” *Accent* 15 (Autumn 1955): 293-297, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 53.

⁶⁸ Bornhauser, “Book Reviews: Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and *The Bride of Innisfallen*,” 49.

⁶⁹ Gooch, 254.

⁷⁰ O'Connor to Maryat Lee, 10 March 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 209.

⁷¹ See O'Connor to Betty Hester, 2 November 1957: “Anyway, without permission, [the publisher] has changed the title of the collection to *The Artificial Nigger* and on the jacket has featured a big black African, apparently in agony, granite agony; which is supposed to be an artificial nigger.” In *The Habit of Being*, 249.

“ironic violence”⁷² or, in the more colloquial words of Granville Hicks, leaves a “nasty taste in the reader’s mouth.”⁷³

Indeed, the “difficulty” of responding to this very nastiness is a theme that runs through the early reviews. One of the first critical notices of the collection warned that O’Connor “is not the kind of writer who caters to people who want what is commonly called escape stuff” and stated, “If you are one of those who ‘read for entertainment,’ skip Miss O’Connor.”⁷⁴

Interestingly, what the reviewer means by “escape stuff” can be vaguely defined as the material of bestsellers and potboilers—but these kind of books feature as many, if not more, criminal characters and scenes of lust, murder, and mayhem than are found in O’Connor’s fiction. What presumably makes *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* different from these “entertainments” is O’Connor’s use of these sensationalistic elements as a means to explore larger, and more complicated, human issues; Mickey Spillane’s Mike Hammer killed more people in print than O’Connor’s Misfit did, but his violence was not viewed as exceptional. In O’Connor’s case, other reviewers offered similar warnings: Orville Prescott stated, “Obviously, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is not a dish to be set before most readers”⁷⁵ while another noted that the collection “is hardly to be recommended for light reading.”⁷⁶ The critical community seemed to define “light reading” and “escape stuff” as fiction in which the killer does his or her business for clear and recognizable aims: money, revenge, sex, or power. A killer whose acts reflect an existential

⁷² Butcher, “Ten Pokes in the Ribs with a Poisoned Dart,” 42.

⁷³ Hicks, “A Belated Tribute to Short Stories by Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor,” 45.

⁷⁴ Celestine Sibley, “Georgia Writer Shuns Escapism,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 17, 1955, 24, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 29-30.

⁷⁵ Orville Prescott, “Books of the Times,” *New York Times*, June 10, 1955, 23.

⁷⁶ Ray Dilley, “Flannery O’Connor’s Telling of Stories Shockingly Impressive,” *Savannah Evening Press*, June 4, 1955, B16, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 32.

and spiritual crisis and who undermines the announced motives of his own actions with the remark, “It’s no real pleasure in life”⁷⁷ was more difficult to categorize. The difficulty lay not so much in the physical brutality, but in the reader’s need to make thematic sense of it. As one critic stated while comparing O’Connor’s “visions” to those of Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Faulkner, “The reader (sometimes with great creative effort) must seek to enter the world of their visions, and if successful, is rewarded.”⁷⁸ “Difficult” at this point in O’Connor’s burgeoning reputation was a watchword meaning both “hard to stomach” as well as “intellectually challenging”: thus the content prompted one reviewer to recommend the book only for “adult readers”⁷⁹ and Caroline Gordon noted that “many people profess to find her work hard to understand.”⁸⁰ O’Connor was as rough on the senses as she was on the soul. As with *Wise Blood*, many critics pointed out the horrors and violence of O’Connor’s work but fell short of further comment; they saw the “large and startling figures” but did not examine their meaning, as if the strangeness and violence of her stories were included for their own sakes, rather than for any thematic purposes. “When I see these stories described as horror stories,” O’Connor wrote to Betty Hester, “I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong horror.”⁸¹ O’Connor knew that many readers found it easier to be shocked by the Misfit’s actions, but less so by a crisis of faith. Describing a work as “difficult” as a means of praise has been a longstanding critical habit and has a history of its own,⁸² a history which includes

⁷⁷ O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 22.

⁷⁸ Griffith, “Stories of Gifted Writer Acquire Stature of Myths,” 34.

⁷⁹ Ullrich, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Best Sellers*, 40.

⁸⁰ Caroline Gordon, “With a Glitter of Evil,” *New York Times Book Review*, June 12, 1955, 5.

⁸¹ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 20 July, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 90.

O'Connor's reviewers here as they wrestled with her first book of stories. This aspect of her reputation still maintains: the opening sentence of a recent study of O'Connor's work claims that many readers find her work "difficult to understand"⁸³ and, as we shall see in chapter 6, many contemporary everyday readers describe her work as difficult in terms of both form and content.

At this point in her career, O'Connor herself saw the writing on the wall in terms of her reputation as an author whose reputation for "brutality"⁸⁴ had taken root in the critical soil. In a letter in which she spoke of a harsh review in the *New Yorker* (an ironic audience indeed) that characterized her work as violent but superficial, O'Connor remarked, "I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call *A Good Man* brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder nor less sentimental than Christian realism."⁸⁵ O'Connor uses "hard" here to mean "brutal and sarcastic"—"hard" to stomach and "hard" on one's easy rather than difficult assumptions. Her remark reflects the degree to which she was aware of her growing reputation as a writer who approached her subjects without pity and her readers without restraint. To O'Connor, some readers dwelled upon "the wrong kind of horror" while others dwelled upon the wrong kind of "hardness." This "hardness" is another part of her reputation

⁸² See, for example, Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998) and Joyce Piell Wexler, *Who Paid for Modernism? Art, Money, and The Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997).

⁸³ Henry T. Edmonson III, *Return to Good and Evil: Flannery O'Connor's Response to Nihilism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), xi.

⁸⁴ "Briefly Noted: Fiction," *New Yorker*, June 18, 1955, 93.

⁸⁵ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 20 July, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 90.

that maintains: in a 2013 interview, scholar Ralph Wood described O'Connor's prose and theology as "straightforward as a gunshot."⁸⁶

Dramatizing for various audiences the "Christian realism" of which she speaks was O'Connor's grand artistic goal, a goal that her current reputation suggests she reached. For example, in a 2009 PBS interview, Ralph Wood commented on her reputation in unequivocal language:

Flannery O'Connor is the only great Christian writer this nation has produced. Now, that's an astonishing fact. Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, Twain, Emily Dickinson, Frost, Stevens—not one of them Christian, at least not orthodoxly Christian. She's a Southerner and a Catholic, she's not at the center of American culture, and yet she is our only great Christian writer.⁸⁷

However, as with *Wise Blood*, the original reviewers of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* did not, as a whole, emphasize what Wood states as obvious and which the current critical community generally believes, as reflected in the amount and focus of scholarly and popular examinations of O'Connor and her work.⁸⁸ Some readers immediately noticed what O'Connor and Wood both state about her work, but most of them did not. The readers who did immediately recognize the Christian themes of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* deserve attention here because their reviews are important mile-markers on the road of O'Connor's reputation, a road which began as a dirt track with small signposts calling *Wise Blood* an odd, minor book about a specific region and which has become a highway marked by billboards (such as Wood's remarks) declaring her

⁸⁶ Quoted in Mary Loftus, "'Straightforward as a Gunshot: Exploring Flannery O'Connor's Tough-Minded Faith,'" *Emory News Center*, http://news.emory.edu/stories/2013/09/spirited_flannery_oconnor_lecture/campus.html, accessed September 26, 2013.

⁸⁷ Ralph Wood, "Flannery O'Connor," *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, PBS, November 20, 2009.

⁸⁸ As mentioned in the introduction, an increasing number of scholarly works on O'Connor have been published since her death. But works such as Brad Gooch's 2009 biography, Lorraine V. Murray's 2009 work *The Abbess of Andalusia: Flannery O'Connor's Spiritual Journey* and Jonathan Rogers' 2012 biography *The Terrible Speed of Mercy: A Spiritual Life of Flannery O'Connor* reflect the desire to bring O'Connor and her works into the hands of non-scholarly readers. Gooch's biography was reissued in paperback in 2010.

universal importance as a Christian writer. When O'Connor's *Complete Stories* was published in 1971, seven years after her death, a critic for the *National Catholic Reporter* could, without pause, call her "the most deeply committed Christian writer of her day,"⁸⁹ but such an understanding was not obvious to all who read her work in that day's first light.

In fact, the first notice that firmly and irrevocably contributed to O'Connor's reputation as a Christian writer was not a scholarly examination in a peer-reviewed journal or an extended appreciation in a literary magazine, but a two-paragraph letter to the editor of *Commonweal*. Dale Francis, who would later found the *Texas Catholic Herald* and serve as Director of the University of Notre Dame Press, responded to James Greene's review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in which Greene praised O'Connor's work for demonstrating the "rustic religiosity" of her characters and for the ways in which she "lifts a 'comic' device to complex dimensions."⁹⁰ Francis shared Greene's admiration of O'Connor's work, but argued that Greene was not seeing what informed it:

To the editors: I couldn't be more in agreement with James Greene in his praise of the talents of Flannery O'Connor (July 22). But I would like to suggest that it is the Catholicism of Miss O'Connor that gives her the viewpoint from which she writes. There is compassion in her writing, there is understanding of reality; she belongs to neither the school of writing about the South that sees only decadence nor to the school that sees only magnolias.

Miss O'Connor—who despite the Irish name is a convert to the Church—is an important addition to the list of American Catholic writers. And make no mistake, although her stories have not touched on Catholic subject matter, she is not just a writer who is a Catholic, but a Catholic writer.⁹¹

Francis's need to "suggest" that O'Connor's Catholicism was the thematic foundation of her work might strike a modern reader as akin to a critic's need to "suggest" that Oscar Wilde's

⁸⁹ Joel Wells, "A Genius Who Frustrated Critics," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 19, 1971, 6, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 435.

⁹⁰ Greene, "The Comic and the Sad," 43.

⁹¹ Dale Francis, "Flannery O'Connor," *Commonweal* 62 (August 12, 1955): 471.

sexuality informed *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The statement seems less striking than trite, the mouthing of a critical commonplace. However, the very word “suggest,” used by a reader like Francis (who was well-versed in contemporary Christian writing) suggests that regarding O’Connor as a Catholic was a novel idea. Also worth notice here is that even Francis seems to not realize the depth of his own insight: the statement, “her stories have not touched on Catholic subject matter” seems impossible, at this point in time, to make. One only needs to examine the collection’s table of contents to see that the stories abound in “Catholic subject matter,” such as baptism (“The River”), redemption (“A Good Man Is Hard to Find”), the sacrifice of innocents (“The Displaced Person”), divine mercy (“The Artificial Nigger”), and, most obviously, the Eucharist (“A Temple of the Holy Ghost”). Scholars can now begin their books with sentences such as, “Flannery O’Connor’s religious faith engages the interest of nearly every critic or reviewer who considers her fiction,”⁹² but this general interest was not felt to an early Catholic reader such as Francis, never mind the dozens of other critics who could not see the Catholic forest for the grotesque and “difficult” trees.

Francis’s letter is also worth notice because of an error that reveals how Catholic writers were sometimes received. His claim that O’Connor was “a convert to the Church” was untrue: O’Connor’s parents were prominent Catholics in both Savannah and Milledgeville and she was raised in the faith. Why Francis described her as a “convert” is unknown, but in a letter to Frances Neel Cheney, written a month after Francis’s piece, O’Connor noted:

I must say Mr. Dale Francis’ communication didn’t rejoice me any. I wrote him a real polite letter though and *thanked* him for his high opinion and told him I was a born Catholic. I thought maybe after that he would write them and correct it but he didn’t even answer my letter. It doesn’t make any difference except that

⁹² Carter H. Martin, *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O’Connor* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 10. Martin’s was one of the first examinations of O’Connor’s Catholic themes and, as such, it reveals that these themes needed to be pointed out and elucidated for O’Connor’s readers.

people do believe that if you have been brought up in the church, you write ads if you write anything.⁹³

Three years later, O'Connor's reputation as a "convert" still surfaced with enough frequency to make O'Connor complain to Cecil Dawkins, "They always insist on calling me a convert" and blame Francis's letter to *Commonweal* for the mistake: "He thought somebody told him so, or some such thing, and ever since anybody that writes anything announces I am a convert."⁹⁴ This error illuminates the ways that some critics—even admiring ones, like Francis—regarded writing that explored spiritual themes: presumably only one with all the sound and fury of a convert would want to explore these themes in her work or be unabashed in her enthusiasm for doing so.⁹⁵ Just as assumptions about the South were epitomized in Mencken's "The Sahara of the Bozart," those about the pedestrian qualities of Catholic writing were reflected in an essay by George Orwell composed fifteen years before the publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*:

The atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to prose, and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchical of all forms of literature. How many Roman Catholics have been good novelists? Even the handful one could name have usually been bad Catholics. The novel is practically a Protestant form of art; it is a product of the free mind, of the autonomous individual.⁹⁶

The idea that a free mind could not coexist with a Catholic soul is one still found in some circles today and was present in O'Connor's crack about writers of faith being assumed to write only ads. To O'Connor, the danger of being labeled as a Catholic writer was that readers "assumed

⁹³ O'Connor to Frances Neel Cheney, 7 September 1955, in *The Correspondence of Flannery O'Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, 22.

⁹⁴ O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 8 June 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 287.

⁹⁵ In Jonathan Rogers' recent biography of O'Connor, for example, he describes the recently-baptized Caroline Gordon as possessing "all the zeal of a convert," as if converts were automatically more zealous than those raised in the faith. See Rogers, 51.

⁹⁶ George Orwell, "Inside the Whale," in *Essays* (New York: Everyman's Library, 2002), 239.

that you have some religious axe to grind”⁹⁷ and that “no one thinks you can lift the pen without trying to show somebody redeemed.”⁹⁸ Spiritual propaganda disguised as fiction was never her aim: as she explained to a priest, “being propaganda for the side of the angels only makes it worse.”⁹⁹

The second important notice of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* to reflect O’Connor’s growing reputation as a Catholic writer appeared two months after Francis’s letter. Writing in *Today*, a Catholic periodical, John A. Lynch used the occasion of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* to comment on O’Connor but also on what he viewed as the timid state of Catholic publishers and the readers to which they catered. Baldly stating that O’Connor “is a Catholic writer, or, a Catholic who is a writer, or, a writer who is a Catholic,” Lynch laments that she “remains outside the literary fraternity.”¹⁰⁰ Her status as outsider, according to Lynch, was the result of the assumptions held by readers such as Orwell and which O’Connor addressed when mentioning that too many readers assumed that Catholics could write only propaganda: “In this enlightened day, Flannery O’Connor, for all her ability, is faced with a formidable congregation of audience and critics who would decide a writer’s merits on his Catholicism, and his Catholicism, in turn, on his expressed piety.”¹⁰¹ “Expressed” is the key word here, for Lynch further complains that O’Connor has been ignored by more mainstream Catholic outlets because “Miss O’Connor’s orthodoxy is not their orthodoxy,” an orthodoxy “co-existent only with sweetness and light.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ O’Connor to Elizabeth Bishop, 23 April 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 391.

⁹⁸ O’Connor to John Hawkes, 3 March 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 434.

⁹⁹ O’Connor to Fr. J. H. McCown, 9 May 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 157.

¹⁰⁰ Lynch, “Isolated World,” 46.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 47.

The violence and what Lynch calls the “macabre tightening” of O’Connor’s stories was now viewed as an asset and as crucial to her thematic concerns. Lynch’s review is important for proclaiming that one could explore Catholic themes in a way directly opposite those found in *The Catholic Home Journal*, which Lynch notes solicited “snappy love stories with a light Catholic touch.”¹⁰³ Indeed, Lynch’s assertion that little magazines and other secular sources provided a more welcome forum for O’Connor and her work than Catholic outlets seems well-founded: reviews that emphasized the moral and Catholic foundations of O’Connor’s collection were found in the pages of the *Kenyon Review*,¹⁰⁴ the *Sewanee Review*,¹⁰⁵ and the liberal and socialist *New Leader*, where Granville Hicks noted that O’Connor writes from “an orthodox Christian point of view.”¹⁰⁶

The third important notice that reflects O’Connor’s growing reputation as a Catholic writer is, like the first one discussed above, so short that its incisive insight might seem the more surprising. Less a review than a squib, this unsigned notice in *Commonweal* of the 1957 paperback edition of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* encapsulates two years’ worth of critical evolution in less than fifty words: “Astonishingly adult and profound short stories by one of the most seriously theological and competent of women novelists. These earthy stories of the South are by a talent who bids fair to be a Catholic Turgenev. (Recently reissued as a paperback.)”¹⁰⁷ All of the early history of critical engagement with O’Connor’s collection surfaces in this

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Walter Elder stated, “I suggest that her stories are morally absolute” and that O’Connor “dares to assault the readers.” Walter Elder, “That Region,” *Kenyon Review* 17 (Autumn 1955): 661-70, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 55-58.

¹⁰⁵ “Miss O’Connor is in essence a religious writer. Knowledge of god and evil is at the heart of her stories.” See Rubin, “Two Ladies of the South,” 61.

¹⁰⁶ Hicks, “A Belated Tribute to Short Stories by Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor,” 45.

¹⁰⁷ Unsigned review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *Commonweal* 66 (February 22, 1957): 541.

unsigned notice. “Astonishingly adult” recalls the reviews that emphasized the stories’ violence and nastiness. “Profound” recalls the increased attention to ways that this violence suggests deeper, spiritual themes. “Women novelists” and “stories of the South” are predictable in their appearance, but are used here as means of praise—O’Connor is “seriously theological and competent” and her South is “earthy” or realistic. And O’Connor is again compared to another author, but now the comparison is not to the predictable Faulkner, Caldwell, or McCullers, but to a non-Southern, non-Western figure whose similarities to O’Connor are less regional than philosophical. That such a number of assumptions about O’Connor could all be compressed into such a short space suggests the degree to which, in only two years since the initial publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, they had become established in a general critical consciousness. A “genuine” authorial audience, it now seemed, was forging O’Connor’s reputation, although these readers would soon be challenged by a different kind of opposition upon the release of her next work.

The Violent Bear It Away

In 1960, five years after the publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and only four years before O’Connor’s death, Farrar, Straus & Cudahy published *The Violent Bear It Away*, O’Connor’s second novel and the last of her fiction to be published during her lifetime. Granted, eight years after *Wise Blood*, some readers were still amazed by O’Connor’s sex and prone to left-handed compliments such as, “There is strength and a gustiness in her which is rare in any woman writer.”¹⁰⁸ O’Connor’s Southern sensibilities were still a part of many reviews and almost as much of her reputation as the work itself: Faulkner still occasionally cast his

¹⁰⁸ R. L. Morgan, “Potentiality for Greatness: *The Violent Bear It Away*, Exciting New Fiction Effort,” *Little Rock Arkansas Gazette*, July 24, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 147.

shadow, as when one reviewer noted that the book “smelled of Faulkner.”¹⁰⁹ But O’Connor was now widely regarded as different from other Southern writers because of what critics had come to recognize about her spiritual themes: writing in the *Arizona Quarterly*, for example, Donald C. Emerson stated that O’Connor was often called a “Southern Writer” but noted that O’Connor could not be so easily labeled, since “Her values are Christian, and the horrors with which she deals have meaning where the witless violence of Caldwell’s *Tobacco Road* do not.”¹¹⁰

Emerson’s remark recalls the earlier point made about the level and meaning of violence in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* compared to that found in generic pulp fiction. And as with *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, other critics also seemed to discover O’Connor’s South as a potential staging ground for fiction exploring transcendent themes. One of the novel’s early and enthusiastic reviewers stated, “Tarwater is one of the most challenging symbols of modern man who tries to see only the part of reality that he wants to see,”¹¹¹ while another noted that O’Connor’s works “are not regional, but are of the people whose special conflicts with life could happen anywhere.”¹¹² Such praise marks how far responses to O’Connor had come from remarks claiming that *Wise Blood* was “about the South” and “southern religionists.”¹¹³ The *Times Literary Supplement* recognized *The Violent Bear It Away* as a novel that transcended even the category of American fiction and explored mankind on a “universal scale.”¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Ben Czaplewski, “Sin and Salvation,” *Nexus*, October 1960, 7, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 153.

¹¹⁰ Donald C. Emerson, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Arizona Quarterly* 16 (Autumn 1960): 284, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 156.

¹¹¹ P. Albert Duhamel, “Flannery O’Connor’s *VIOLENT* View of Reality,” *Catholic World*, 190 (February 1960): 280-285, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 94.

¹¹² C.B.J., “An Exciting New Novel by Young Southerner,” *Washington Star* (February 28, 1960), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 86.

¹¹³ “New Creative Writers,” *Library Journal*, February 15, 1952, 354, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 3.

O'Connor's reputation had come a long way from the days of *Wise Blood* when she was viewed as a regionalistic oddity: her work was now regarded as possessing "a note of universalism"¹¹⁵ and, although she would still be labeled a "southern girl," the same critic could describe O'Connor as "universal in her work."¹¹⁶ Orwell did not have the final word on orthodox authors, nor was the Sahara of the Bozart now as dry as some had once assumed.

As with *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, reviewers were quick to point out the difficulty of *The Violent Bear It Away*, remarking, "many readers will prefer the pabulum of slick best sellers"¹¹⁷ and noting that "all but the most careful readers are likely to be misled."¹¹⁸ The habit of warning potential readers about the horrors of O'Connor's plots became more pronounced: one reviewer stated that the novel's "strong flavor will be too much for the taste of most fiction readers"¹¹⁹ while another noted that the book would "not appeal to the average reader; nor can it be recommended for teenagers or the immature."¹²⁰ Of course, "grotesque" remained a watchword, appearing in almost every review of the novel and more strongly tied to O'Connor's reputation than ever before.¹²¹ But by now the term was starting to show its age and overuse:

¹¹⁴ Quoted by Frank Bigley in "Back South with Too Much Despair," *Montreal Daily Star* (April 16, 1960), 34, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 130.

¹¹⁵ Ana C. Hunter, "Micawbre [sic] Note Struck by Writer in Powerful Expose of Fanatic," *Savannah Morning News Magazine* (February 21, 1960), 13, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 76.

¹¹⁶ "Hard-Hitting Dixie Belle," *Detroit News* (February 21, 1960), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 74.

¹¹⁷ Deborah Walker, "Flannery O'Connor's Original . . .," *Providence Journal* (February 28, 1960), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 92.

¹¹⁸ Thomas F. Gossett, "The Religious Quest," *Southwest Review* 46 (Winter 1961): 86-87, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 166.

¹¹⁹ Unsigned review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Information: The Catholic Church in American Life* 74 (April 1960): 57-58, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 125.

¹²⁰ Pat Somers Cronin, "Books," *Ave Maria*, July 2, 1960, 25, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 147.

writing in the Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, Louis Dollarhide denied the power and accuracy of the term by arguing, “Here is characterization as incisive and clean-cut as stone images, yet of characters, not mere grotesques, who live and breathe.”¹²² A critic for the *Catholic World* similarly found “grotesque” and its usual companions inadequate: writing of Tarwater’s simultaneous drowning and baptism of his cousin, Bishop, the reviewer cast aside two specific (and important) critical voices and all those who followed their lead:

This time it is doubtful if any reviewer will refer to Tarwater’s action as a “garish climax,” as the *Saturday Review* once did to the climax of her story “Greenleaf”; or as an act of “sardonic brutality,” as *Time* did the action of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” It is now obvious that there is nothing “garish,” “gratuitous,” or “grotesque” about this novel, or about any of her other works for that matter.¹²³

The phrase “It is now obvious” is a reminder of the degree to which literary reputations evolve as a function of time. One way to gage a watchword’s power is to note when voices rise against it.

What had also seemed to vanish from the critical consensus was the notion that O’Connor was a satirist; her humor was noted, but not in terms of how it merely served some satirical end or was being used to attack some apparent target. The dark comedy of her work was mentioned in reviews of *Wise Blood* just as many reviews of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* had noted O’Connor’s “macabre” and “sardonic” humor. Perhaps the most representative example of the ways many readers regarded O’Connor’s humor at this point in her career is found in a review for the *Chicago Sunday Tribune Magazine of Books*, where Fanny Butcher (a critic whose very name might have been created by O’Connor) noted that her work was “shot through with humor, but of a menacing kind” and compared O’Connor’s comic sense to “a poke in the ribs made with

¹²¹ There are dozens of reviews that feature this term. One representative example: “The young Southern novelist Flannery O’Connor inhabits a worlds as grotesque as anything in contemporary American literature.” Harry Mooney, Jr., “Dark Allegory,” *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, February 28, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 87.

¹²² Louis Dollarhide, “Significant New Work by Flannery O’Connor,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, March 27, 1960, D6, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 122.

¹²³ Duhamel, “Flannery O’Connor’s *VIOLENT* View of Reality,” 97.

a poison barb.”¹²⁴ Descriptions of the humor in *The Violent Bear It Away* followed suit: critics called the novel’s humor “rueful,”¹²⁵ “merciless,”¹²⁶ “mirthless,”¹²⁷ and, of course, “grotesque,”¹²⁸ but they also noted that O’Connor’s humor was a means by which she illuminated human nature—something that she always did but which was now noticed by her readers as part of her complex art. Thus Tarwater’s struggle was described by Paul Engle as “hilarious and touching”¹²⁹ and Thomas F. Gossett stated that O’Connor possessed “a mordant humor which is extremely perceptive.”¹³⁰ Not surprisingly, Brainard Cheney—as much of a member of her genuine authorial audience as O’Connor could wish—noted that O’Connor’s humor was not simply sarcastic or dark but philosophical and, ultimately, affirming:

Her original achievement, her genius, is that she has restored to humor the religious point of view. That is, man looking at himself not in the presence of time and space, however great, and certainly not this humanly-conceived time and space looking at man. But man, looking at himself, in the Presence of Infinity—Infinity for Whom there is no unknown, no unknowable, from Whom there are no secrets. But an Infinity of Love and Compassion as well as Awfulness.¹³¹

These ideas apply to *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* as much as they do to *The Violent Bear It Away*, but they took eight years to make their way into print. The history of how readers characterized O’Connor’s humor—which remained unchanged in tone and style

¹²⁴ Butcher, “Ten Pokes in the Rib with a Poison Dart,” 42.

¹²⁵ Frank J. Warnke, “A Vision Deep and Narrow,” *New Republic* 142 (March 14, 1960): 18-19, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 117.

¹²⁶ Betts, “Total Commitment to Christian Frame,” 117.

¹²⁷ Emerson, 157.

¹²⁸ Harold C. Gardiner, “A Tragic Image of Man,” *America* 103 (March 5, 1960): 682-83, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 108.

¹²⁹ Paul Engle, “Insight, Richness, Humor, and Chills,” *Chicago Sunday Tribune: Magazine of Books*, March 6, 1960, sec. 4, p. 3, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 112.

¹³⁰ Gossett, “The Religious Quest,” 166.

¹³¹ Brainard Cheney, “Bold, Violent, Yet Terribly Funny Tale,” *Nashville Banner*, March 4, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 107.

throughout her career—demonstrates the ways in which critics struggled to describe a humor they found unsettling; many knew that they were not invited to laugh with the characters, but nor could they simply laugh at them. Eventually, her expressions of ethical issues with humor would become another part of O'Connor's reputation that was taken for granted, as in Walter Clemons' 1971 *Newsweek* review of *The Complete Stories*: "To read *The Complete Stories* is to see, better than before, the development of her profound moral vision. This doesn't change the fact that Flannery O'Connor is one of the funniest American writers."¹³² When Clemons subsequently notes, "It takes some readers (I was one) a while to understand that it's more than a superb Punch-and-Judy show,"¹³³ he could be speaking for the greater critical community.

The most notable and complex issue that arises from an examination of *The Violent Bear It Away*'s initial reception is the way in which readers responded to the prophet Mason Tarwater in particular and the possibility of prophecy in general. Part of the novel's tension arises from the two strong, opposing characters vying for the heart and mind of the fourteen-year-old protagonist. Old Mason Tarwater, Francis Marion Tarwater's great-uncle, regards prophecy as a trial and a burden but knows that he must follow his calling and raise his great-nephew to assume the prophet's mantle; Rayber, Francis Marion Tarwater's uncle, regards prophecy as a psychological aberration and seeks to save his nephew from what he views as the insane manipulations of the old man. Tarwater's struggle between these two conflicting accounts of "prophecy" drives the plot of the novel and brings Tarwater to a final revelation. The last pages present Tarwater's acceptance of his vocation and his march to the hellish city, where "the children of God lay sleeping."¹³⁴ His role will not be an easy one—prophets are never honored

¹³² Walter Clemons, "Acts of Grace," *Newsweek*, November 8, 1971, 116.

¹³³ Ibid.

even in their own houses—but his charge to awaken the sleeping souls is one that he finds he cannot deny. A green reader's questioning Tarwater's vocation is expected and even, at times, courted by O'Connor as a means of drawing the reader into Tarwater's own struggle. But in the final analysis, the implications of O'Connor's form, content, and title work to confirm the reality of Tarwater's vision. Like Hazel Motes, Tarwater ends the novel in surrender to a force that O'Connor identifies and depicts forcefully and without humor. Prophecy is a deadly serious business.

O'Connor's letters repeatedly reflect her concern about this topic but also her unwillingness to compromise her own vision of prophecy. She knew that her treatment of the subject would generate a great deal of misunderstanding, even attacks, from a large segment of the critical community. Before the novel's publication, she wrote to Maryat Lee, "There is nothing like being pleased with your own work—and this is the best stage—before it is published and begins to be misunderstood."¹³⁵ Days later, she wrote to Cecil Dawkins, "I dread all the reviews, all the misunderstanding of my intentions, etc. etc. Sometimes the most you can ask is to be ignored."¹³⁶ To Ted Spivey, she stated, "A lot of arty people will read it and be revolted, I trust"¹³⁷; to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, she joked, "I await the critical reception with distaste and unanticipation."¹³⁸ These are only some of the many remarks in the same vein that runs through O'Connor's letters of this period, suggesting that she recognized that many readers would attack her just as the sleeping children of God mentioned in the novel's final sentence will

¹³⁴ O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 243.

¹³⁵ O'Connor to Maryat Lee, 5 July 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 339.

¹³⁶ O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 17 July 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 340.

¹³⁷ O'Connor to Dr. T. R. Spivey, 18 July 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 341.

¹³⁸ O'Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, 11 October 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 355.

attack Tarwater. “I am resigned to the fact that I am going to be the book’s greatest admirer,”¹³⁹ she remarked and steeled herself against what she assumed would be a wave of “nothing but disappointed reviews.”¹⁴⁰

The initial critical reception proved O’Connor half right. There were a number of vehement attacks featuring what she would undoubtedly label as misreadings of both the novel and her artistic intentions in writing it. But there were also a number of enthusiastic reviews that praised the novel as O’Connor’s best work to date. One interesting aspect of this phase of O’Connor’s reception is that the split between readers occurred along the fault-line between her genuine authorial audience and her ironic one. With some important exceptions that will be examined later, those in the genuine authorial audience—many of them writing in Catholic outlets—assumed the reality of Mason’s prophecies and Tarwater’s vocation. Those in the ironic authorial audience assumed that the prophet was a lunatic and that Tarwater was a victim of backwoods brainwashing. Interestingly, however, the audience in which a reader “lived” was not always a guarantee of how he or she would respond: there were members of the genuine authorial audience who attacked the novel and members of the ironic authorial audience who praised it.

Most original readers were, however, split along what might be called “lines of audience,” and such a split had great implications for how readers regarded O’Connor’s thematic concerns. Depending on how he or she read the novel, a reviewer would assume it was (to those in the genuine authorial audience) an examination of what O’Connor called “the nobility of

¹³⁹ O’Connor to Elizabeth Bishop, 2 August 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 344.

¹⁴⁰ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 30 January 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 372.

unnaturalness”¹⁴¹ or (to those in the ironic authorial audience) a chilling portrayal of the manipulation of a vulnerable youth. Interestingly, within the novel, Mason Tarwater would surely endorse the first theme, while Rayber would affirm the second, although even this assertion about Rayber is problematic, since he physically and mentally collapses after realizing that he has sacrificed his humanity for the sake of a spiteful philosophical stance. As with one aspect of the novel’s general reception, O’Connor anticipated this response as well: to Betty Hester, she wrote, “Many will think that the author shares Rayber’s point of view and praise the book on account of it”¹⁴² and to John Hawkes she stated, “The modern reader will identify himself with the schoolteacher [Rayber], but it is the old man who speaks for me.”¹⁴³

Those in the genuine authorial audience took Mason and O’Connor at their word. Not surprisingly, many of these readers and reviewers published in Catholic periodicals. For example, an unnamed reviewer for the Catholic weekly journal *America* stated that the novel depicts the ways in which “contemporary man gropes toward God through a miasma of self-deception that can be enlightened only per *Christum Dominum nostrum*.”¹⁴⁴ In *Today*, another Catholic periodical, Sister Bede Sullivan stated (at the end of her opening paragraph) that O’Connor “sees more clearly than her fellow mortals do, and proclaims more surely the Kingdom of God,”¹⁴⁵ suggesting that O’Connor was prophetic in her own way, an idea Sullivan emphasized in the *Catholic Library World*, where she ended her praise of the novel with the

¹⁴¹ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 25 July 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 343.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ O’Connor to John Hawkes, 13 September, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 350.

¹⁴⁴ “A Few to Keep,” *America* 103 (May 14, 1960), 245, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 136.

¹⁴⁵ Sister Bede Sullivan, “Prophet in the Wilderness,” *Today* 15 (March 1960): 36-37, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 122.

Catholic antiphon, “O wisdom who proceeded from the mouth of the Most High...”¹⁴⁶ Less effusive praise in Catholic quarters came from Bud Johnson in the *Catholic Messenger*, who stated that O’Connor had “written about the great struggle that has engulfed the world since the Fall of Man”¹⁴⁷ and from Eileen Hall, who, in the Archdiocese of Atlanta’s *Bulletin*, referred to Tarwater’s prophetic visions as his “gift” and argued that the novel’s conclusion “demonstrates that God will not be denied nor, in lesser degree, even dictated to.”¹⁴⁸ Writing in the lay Catholic magazine *Jubilee*, Paul Levine described the novel as a portrait of “those who seek to be their own Salvation, only to lose it, and those who grapple with their Redemption, only to accept it.”¹⁴⁹ In one of the longest reviews of the novel, P. Albert Duhamel, writing in *Catholic World*, praised O’Connor’s ability to “see things as they really are,”¹⁵⁰ which to him, of course, meant through a Christian lens. Duhamel’s examination, however, is much more than a glowing review. It is an important moment in the story of O’Connor’s reputation, for Duhamel notes the ways in which O’Connor had been regarded and how, from this moment onward, he imagined she would be:

Until [1959], critics had disguised their uncertainty over just what she could be up to by falling back on the condescending categories of the over-worked reviewer and labeling her “an interesting Southern stylist,” or “promising young woman writer.” With the publication of her third book there is now the very real possibility that they will go to the opposite extreme and disregard her art and concentrate excessively on her ideas.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁶ Sullivan, “Flannery O’Connor and the Dialogue Decade,” *Catholic Library World*, May-June 1960, 518, 521, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 143. Ellipses in original.

¹⁴⁷ Bud Johnson, “A Literary Gourmet’s Delight: Flannery O’Connor’s Novel,” *Catholic Messenger* (June 2, 1960), 15, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 145.

¹⁴⁸ Eileen Hall, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, *The Bulletin* (March 5, 1950), 5, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 109.

¹⁴⁹ Paul Levine, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Jubilee* 8 (May 1960), 52, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 141.

¹⁵⁰ Duhamel, “Flannery O’Connor’s *VIOLENT* View of Reality,” 94.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

Duhamel's words here remind his readers of the power of watchwords and of how an author's reputation comes to be based upon a combination of opinions about both her artistic performance and thematic concerns.

Such positive reviews from O'Connor's genuine authorial audience were not limited, however, to fellow Catholics. Writing in the *New York Herald Tribune*, Coleman Rosenberger described Mason Tarwater as "an aging and authentic prophet" and the novel as a "fairly explicit parable of the twentieth century"¹⁵²; only a reviewer who recognizes (without necessarily sharing) O'Connor's assumptions could label the novel a "parable." Similarly, writing in the *New Republic*, Frank J. Warnke appreciated the novel's powerful theme of "the misery of man without God" but added that it would be "more powerful if the cards were distributed a bit more fairly,"¹⁵³ and wished that O'Connor had made Rayber more than a straw-man in her critique of secular humanism. Here, as elsewhere, one finds that reading as a member of the genuine authorial audience did not guarantee praise: many readers accepted the reality of O'Connor's themes but faulted O'Connor's handling of them. For example, one early reviewer called the novel a "dark allegory touched by the clear light of Christian theology" yet complained that the novel was "weighted, sometimes too heavily, with symbolism."¹⁵⁴ Walter Sullivan, writing in the *Nashville Tennessean*, flatly stated that O'Connor explored the "sense of paradox" that lies "at the heart of the Christian faith" but complained that the novel "thins out at the end, and the pace is perhaps too slow there."¹⁵⁵ Similarly, Paul Pickrel, writing for *Harper's Magazine*, accepted

¹⁵² Coleman Rosenberger, "In a Bizarre Backcountry," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 28, 1960, 13.

¹⁵³ Warnke, "A Vision Deep and Narrow," 117.

¹⁵⁴ Harry Mooney, Jr., "Dark Allegory," *Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph*, February 28, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 88.

the genuine authorial assumptions, describing Tarwater as a young man who “assumes the mantle of prophecy” but also calling O’Connor’s novel “too schematic,” since “every incident neatly advances the scheme, every character illustrates it, and every symbol is exactly in place.”¹⁵⁶ Even a member of the genuine authorial audience writing in a Catholic periodical was not a guarantee of praise: a reviewer for *Ave Maria* magazine—a major Catholic periodical published for over one hundred years—stated that O’Connor wrote “lovely prose” but that *The Violent Bear It Away* would “not appeal to the average reader” because of O’Connor’s “habit of jumping from present to past and back again in a manner readers may find tedious and annoying.” This same reviewer also found Tarwater’s defilement by the man in the lavender-colored car near the end of the novel to be “unfortunate and unnecessary to the story.”¹⁵⁷ O’Connor’s friend and fellow-Catholic Thomas F. Gossett noted, “The trouble is that the religious insight of the great-uncle is so explosive that it often comes through as mere bigotry and does not seem an adequate foil for the smug scientism of Rayber.”¹⁵⁸ While such representative reviews must have done little to boost O’Connor’s sales, their authors did demonstrate that members of the genuine authorial audience—even when they disparaged the novel—were the most ready to judge it by aesthetic criteria, rather than simply react (as Duhamel feared) to her “ideas.” Her thematic concerns, these readers argued, were worthwhile but suffered because of her artistic performance. O’Connor herself might not have objected to such a manner of reading: her letters sometimes reveal her own doubts about her artistic handling of the theme she had chosen, as when she wrote to John Hawkes, “Rayber, of course, was always

¹⁵⁵ Walter Sullivan, “Violence Dominates Fresh Tale,” Nashville *Tennessean*, April 24, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 132.

¹⁵⁶ Paul Pickrel, “The New Books: Other Novels,” *Harper’s Magazine* 220 (April 1960): 114.

¹⁵⁷ Cronin, “Books,” 147.

¹⁵⁸ Gossett, “The Religious Quest,” 167.

the stumbling block,”¹⁵⁹ to the Fitzgeralds, “Rayber has been the trouble all along,”¹⁶⁰ or to her editor, Catherine Carver, “Rayber has been the difficulty all along. I’ll never manage to get him alive as Tarwater and the old man.”¹⁶¹ But at least the members of the genuine authorial audience who faulted the novel on aesthetic grounds were not reacting to O’Connor’s “ideas” but to her skills as a writer. O’Connor would have found such an approach justified, even if she were not pleased with the critical verdicts.

As we have seen, O’Connor had in mind members of the ironic audience as she wrote, but those readers rarely spoke of *The Violent Bear It Away* as an aesthetic object. They instead reacted, as Duhamel predicted, to O’Connor’s “ideas” of prophecy. O’Connor herself jokingly prophesied the critical reaction to be almost uniformly negative, but did not foresee how similar so many of the negative reviews were in focus of attack: old Mason’s status as a prophet. The very first published review of the novel mentions “the old man’s fanaticism”¹⁶² and this label—what might be called the “F-word” of this phase of O’Connor’s reputation—appears throughout the reviews, gaining value as critical currency by the very casualness with which it is used. Dozens of critics repeatedly referred to Mason as “fanatically fundamentalist,”¹⁶³ a man “warped by fanaticism,”¹⁶⁴ a “Baptist fanatic,”¹⁶⁵ and, over and over, a “religious fanatic.”¹⁶⁶

¹⁵⁹ O’Connor to John Hawkes, 6 October, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 352.

¹⁶⁰ O’Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, 20 April, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 329.

¹⁶¹ O’Connor to Catherine Carver, 18 April, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 327.

¹⁶² “Fiction,” *Kirkus Bulletin*, December 15, 1959, 931, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 71.

¹⁶³ Charles A. Brady, “A Powerful Novel Turns on Religious Dilemma of Boy, 14,” *Buffalo Evening News* (February 20, 1960), B6, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 73.

¹⁶⁴ Granville Hicks, “Southern Gothic with a Vengeance,” *Saturday Review*, February 27, 1960, 18, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 84.

¹⁶⁵ Ruth Wolfe Fuller, “Backwoods Story Is Real Tragedy,” *Boston Herald*, February 28, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 86.

Close behind “fanatic” in the watchword race were terms suggesting that Mason’s prophetic gifts were signs of insanity: in a review titled, “Mad Tennessee Prophet Casts Backwoods Shadow,” a reviewer for the *Chattanooga Times* described Mason as “twice as mad as the proverbial March hare”¹⁶⁷ and many other critics argued the same. Mason’s status as a prophet was also routinely undermined by the use of irony-bestowing quotation marks, as in a Massachusetts reviewer’s remark that, “The old man was a ‘prophet’ who believed he was appointed by the lord.”¹⁶⁸ (If Mason is a prophet, then he is neither a fanatic nor “a crack-brained hillbilly”¹⁶⁹—he is, instead, reacting as one might imagine a person reacting who had heard the word of God.) Emily Dickinson argued that much madness was divinest sense, but this was not assumption underlying the ironic audience’s reception of Mason Tarwater. The many unquestioned references to Mason’s “madness” suggests this audience’s fundamental split with their genuine authorial counterparts and the failure, in these arenas, of O’Connor’s “large and startling figures” to make any other impression on those who “think that God is dead.”

These same members of the ironic audience who assumed Mason’s insanity assumed O’Connor’s great theme to be what Granville Hicks described as Tarwater’s attempt to break “out of the darkness of superstition into the light of reason.”¹⁷⁰ For this reading of the novel, one review can stand as a representative example of many: writing in the *Boston Herald*, Ruth

¹⁶⁶ Webster Scott, “The Struggle of Ideals Is Reality,” *Kansas City Star*, March 5, 1960, 7, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 110.

¹⁶⁷ Grady M. Long, “Mad Tennessee Prophet Casts Backwoods Shadow,” *Chattanooga Times*, March 6, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 113.

¹⁶⁸ H.B.H., “A Southern Tale by Flannery O’Connor,” *Springfield Republican*, March 6, 1960, D5, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 112.

¹⁶⁹ Frank J. Prial, “Vivid Imagery,” *Newark Evening News*, February 28, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 88.

¹⁷⁰ Hicks, “Southern Gothic with a Vengeance,” 83.

Wolfe Fuller praised the novel as “very moving” and “superbly written”—but praised it according to a set of values that the novel repeatedly questions and ultimately attacks:

The pitiful and true theme of the book lies in the inhumanity to a child, the little boy Tarwater who has been brought up, if it can be called bringing up, in his dreadful old shack in the woods.

It would spoil the story to tell how the boy’s courage and initiative finally provide his escape. Yet the escape is only temporary, for the tragedy lies in the hurt and harm, so long inflicted.¹⁷¹

Her calling Tarwater a “little boy” despite his age (fourteen) is an attempt to portray him as a victim; her emphasis on his social conditions instead of his spiritual ones brings to mind O’Connor’s jibe that Southern readers “still believe that man has fallen and that he is only perfectible by God’s grace” while those north of the Mason-Dixon Line view spiritual crises as “a problem of better housing, sanitation, health, etc.”¹⁷² Fuller’s speaking of O’Connor’s “true theme” suggests her inability to imagine—like Dr. Adams when trying to console Dr. Johnson—that her subject takes the ideas literally and seriously. Further, Fuller’s characterization of Tarwater’s profound struggle recalls similar reviews of *Wise Blood* in which Motes is viewed as heroic for attempting to break free from the Christ-haunted South; her calling the novel a “tragedy” of “hurt and harm” seems like something that might be said by Bernice Bishop, the “welfare woman” who marries Rayber and who, like him, assumes that spiritual struggles are rooted in social inequities (as opposed to the other way around). As a reviewer for the Massachusetts *Springfield Republican* soberly instructed, “She seems to be giving us an indirect but worthwhile reminder that we are all shaped by our environments”¹⁷³; or as another reviewer

¹⁷¹ Fuller, “Backwoods Story Is Real Tragedy,” 86.

¹⁷² O’Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 8 November, 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 302-303.

¹⁷³ H.B.H., “A Southern Tale by Flannery O’Connor,” 113.

fumed, “Young Tarwater deserved better of life.”¹⁷⁴ Interestingly, Fuller never mentions—despite her apparent concern over “the inhumanity to a child”—Rayber’s attempt to drown his own mentally-retarded son as a means to prove his own superiority over the emotional commitment that the child demanded. Other readers spoke of Rayber in similar terms: Orville Prescott referred to Rayber as a “kindly and well-intentioned schoolteacher”¹⁷⁵ while a reviewer for the *Houston Chronicle* called him “well-meaning” and “placed in juxtaposition to the irrational youth.”¹⁷⁶ Tarwater is often characterized by members of the ironic audience as an “impressionable young boy”¹⁷⁷ or a “corrupted child”¹⁷⁸; that the novel explores Tarwater’s delivery from the corruption of Rayber is never considered, nor, as with Fuller, do ironic reviewers ever mention Rayber’s attempted murder. That Mason is a fanatic is never questioned; that Rayber might be one is never considered. Rather, he is seen as the novel’s hero, “bent on saving the boy from the seeds of destruction he knows the old man has planted”¹⁷⁹ in Tarwater and as a rational figure attempting to undo “the fanatic’s brainwashing”¹⁸⁰ from which he has freed himself and which he seeks to reverse in his nephew. The ironic audience’s siding with Rayber suggests G. K. Chesterton’s argument about the modern cult of “logic” and his remark

¹⁷⁴ William H. Bocklage, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Cincinnati Enquirer* (n.d.), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 106.

¹⁷⁵ Prescott, “Books of the Times,” 35.

¹⁷⁶ T.M., “Violence in Story Evolution Mars New O’Connor Novel,” *Houston Chronicle*, March 13, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 114.

¹⁷⁷ B.P., “O’Connor Novel Is Arresting,” *Huntington Advertiser*, March 20, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 120.

¹⁷⁸ Frank Bigley, “Back South With Too Much Despair,” 130.

¹⁷⁹ Mary Elizabeth Reedy, “Conflict of Wills,” *Omaha World-Herald*, April 24, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 132.

¹⁸⁰ Francis X. Canfield, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, *Critic* 18 (April-May 1960), 45, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 134.

that an excess of reason—not spiritually—breeds insanity: “Poets do not go mad,” he wrote, “but chess-players do.”¹⁸¹ While these critics are surely not mad, their categorical dismissal of Mason as such reflects a refusal to take the novel on its own terms.

As we have seen, there were members of the genuine authorial audience who could accept O’Connor’s themes but fault her artistic performance. Conversely, there were members of the ironic audience who, like Fuller, categorically denied the reality of O’Connor’s overarching theme of prophecy yet still praised the novel. These readers viewed her artistic performance as supporting their argument for Mason’s insanity. They assumed that O’Connor, despite what later readers might see as the obvious Catholic themes of *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, was mocking the old man in her novel just as they were in their reviews; as they had viewed *Wise Blood* a bitter “satire” of religion (rather than an examination of a man’s deathly-serious struggle with Christ), they viewed *The Violent Bear It Away* as “a bitter denunciation of faith based solely on emotion.”¹⁸² For example, a writer for the *Omaha World-Herald* stated, “That the old man is insane is obvious” but then praised the “character drawing” as “magnificent” and declared, “If there were more books like this one, television would have fewer viewers.”¹⁸³ Many members of the ironic audience praised the novel not as one depicting Tarwater’s struggle against the fate chosen for him by God, but against what one reader called the “chains of fanaticism”¹⁸⁴ forged by his great-uncle. Reading as a member of the genuine authorial audience did not guarantee praise, nor did reading as a member of the ironic audience

¹⁸¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Hollywood, Florida: Simon & Brown, 2012), 13.

¹⁸² V.G.S., “O’Connor Novel Good,” *New Bedford Standard-Times*, March 13, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 116.

¹⁸³ Reedy, “Conflict of Wills,” 132.

¹⁸⁴ Richard Daw, “Georgia Author, Flannery O’Connor, Pens Gripping Story of Backwoods Boy,” *Pensacola News Journal*, March 6, 1960, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 111.

guarantee condemnation. One cannot help noting how perfectly the reviews of *The Violent Bear It Away* reflect the novel's portrayal of the "perfidy" Rayber works upon Mason: many reviews from the ironic audience read as if they were written by Rayber himself, who, of course, does write a long analysis of his uncle's "mania" for a magazine, noting, "He needed the assurance of a call, and so he called himself."¹⁸⁵ Rarely has the critical reaction to a novel so perfectly reflected the novel's very themes.

The reviews that will most surprise a modern reader of O'Connor were ones that came relatively late in the novel's reception. These questioned the single most prominent aspect of her reputation found when readers describe O'Connor today: her Catholicism. Robert O. Bowen, one of O'Connor's contemporary novelists and Professor of Literature at Cornell, offered what may stand as the single greatest attack in print thus far and an indicator of how O'Connor's reputation as a Catholic writer had developed. His 1961 review, "Hope vs. Despair in the Gothic Novel," appeared in *Renascence*, a journal of Marquette University still published in the twenty-first century, which, according to its website, acts as a "a Christian witness to literature for promoting the study of values" and "includes essays which incorporate Christian perspectives as a way of looking at literature."¹⁸⁶ In his examination of *The Violent Bear It Away* for *Renascence*, Bowen complains that contemporary critics accept literary reputations *prima facie* and, in the case of O'Connor, assume that her work is laden with "religious profundity."¹⁸⁷ Yet Bowen asks, "Must we accept her work as 'Catholic' because she is Catholic?" His long review argues that the novel reflects the "relentlessly deterministic pattern" of contemporary works and

¹⁸⁵ O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 19.

¹⁸⁶ "About *Renascence*," <http://www.marquette.edu/renascence/about.html> (accessed November 30, 2012).

¹⁸⁷ Robert O. Bowen, "Hope vs. Despair in the New Gothic Novel," *Renascence* 13 (Spring 1961), 147-52, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 161.

faults it on both aesthetic and Catholic grounds. While Tarwater's vocation is, to Bowen, "a true one," O'Connor's artistic performance in presenting him as unable to engage in any choice—his lack of what modern critics might call "agency"—makes him O'Connor's puppet rather than a recognizable person. To Bowen, O'Connor's inescapable and pessimistic determinism belies her reputation as a Catholic writer:

Since this novel has been widely spoken of as "Catholic," it seems imperative that one point out that like so much current negative writing, this book is not Catholic at all in any doctrinal sense. Neither its content nor its significance is Catholic. Beyond not being Catholic, the novel is distinctly anti-Catholic in being a thorough, point-by-point dramatic argument against Free Will, Redemption, and Divine Justice, along with other aspects of Catholic thought.¹⁸⁸

O'Connor was previously compared to Faulkner and McCullers because of their common regions, but Bowen compares her to Bellow, Nabokov, and Salinger as writers who "can tear down but not build up, who will not tolerate faith or hope."¹⁸⁹ Such alleged intolerances on O'Connor's part result in Bowen's final judgment of her as "an enemy of literature and of life."¹⁹⁰ This objection to O'Connor's alleged anti-Catholic determinism is also found in a review by Frederick S. Kiley, who complained that O'Connor only offered extremes of rationalism and fanaticism, and that her characters, in deterministic dazes, "go places and do things without ever quite realizing why or how."¹⁹¹

Two years after Bowen's attack, Thomas F. Smith reevaluated the novel for the *Pittsburg Catholic* newspaper and directly addressed the subject of O'Connor's reputation as a Catholic author: "I'm pleased as anyone that she's a member of the Church, but it is regrettable that her

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 164.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 165.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Frederick S. Kiley, "In Print: Bargain Book," *Clearing House* 36 (November 1961): 188, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 166.

Catholicity has complicated discussion of her literary merits in some quarters.”¹⁹² In these responses we see that what was once invisible had now become too pronounced and even subject to attack. Only a few years earlier, critics were informing their readers of O’Connor’s Catholic concerns as if they had made an important discovery; now, some readers were pushing back against this part of her reputation, arguing that a reputation as a Catholic was not enough to credit an author as one interested in Catholic themes or capable of the skillful dramatization of them in his or her fiction. Smith’s review locates a moment in the development of O’Connor’s reputation where her status as a Catholic author had trumped her status as a female or even a Southern one and was accepted widely enough to warrant attention and require correction.

In conclusion, an examination of O’Connor’s reception of this period suggests the ways in which readers positioned as members of different audiences can be generally predicted to respond to texts that either flatter or outrage their assumptions. However, as we have seen, members of the genuine and ironic authorial audiences can sometimes dismiss or praise a work in ways that might seem surprising at first glance: genuine authorial readers could fault what they regarded as O’Connor’s heavy-handedness while ironic authorial readers could admire what they regarded as O’Connor’s skillful characterization. Such readers could also lavishly praise O’Connor for her dramatizations of “fanaticism.” In D. H. Lawrence’s terms, they could trust the tale but not the teller—or vice-versa. In 1960, four years before O’Connor’s death, Eileen Hall looked back at the initial reception of *Wise Blood* and predicted the ways in which *The Violent Bear It Away* would complicate O’Connor’s reputation:

It is an interesting aspect of Miss O’Connor’s career that when her first work was being published in the early fifties she was gleefully identified by many as her own antithesis. At a great distance, grappling antagonists often have a confusing way of looking like lovers...Now that the sixties are here and the author has

¹⁹² Thomas F. Smith, “Fiction as Prophecy: Novels of Flannery O’Connor Re-Read and Re-Evaluated,” *Pittsburgh Catholic* (March 28, 1963), “Fine Arts Supplement,” 1, 3, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 170.

published her third book, she is not misunderstood. This does not mean, however, that she is yet properly appreciated. On the contrary, now that many of her erstwhile admirers have learned that she means precisely the opposite of their original assumption, she may, in some corners at least, be even less appreciated.¹⁹³

Hall's remarks perfectly characterize the early reviewers of *Wise Blood* who claimed the novel was satirical or that Motes was a paranoid schizophrenic, as well as those original reviewers of *The Violent Bear It Away* who called Mason a "fanatic" or objected to the very label of "Catholic author" when used to describe O'Connor.

My previous chapter concluded with an examination of the second (1962) edition of *Wise Blood*, which reviewers read in light of what they had encountered in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, *The Violent Bear It Away*, and O'Connor's emerging reputation as a Catholic author. With minor exceptions, the rest of O'Connor's works would be posthumously published; how her reputation continued to develop as a result of reviewers' reading habits and ideological positions, stage and screen adaptations of her work, and her presence on the web will be explored in future chapters.

¹⁹³ Hall, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, 110.

CHAPTER 3

Death Comes for the Author: O'Connor's Posthumous Reputation

The years between the publication of *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) and *Mystery and Manners* (1969) saw the deterioration of O'Connor's health and her death in 1964. But this period also saw a steady literary output and strengthening of her reputation, both in terms of quality and the trends noted in previous chapters. Her death did not slow her work's rate of publication nor quiet the readers and reviewers who were working, however unknowingly and certainly not in concert, to construct a reputation that would finally earn O'Connor the first posthumously-awarded National Book Award for fiction, a place in the Library of America, and a collection of associations and assumptions about her fiction that accompanies O'Connor's name to the present day.

After *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor continued publishing short stories in little magazines (such as *New World Writing* and *Sewanee Review*) as well as in one with greater, national readership: the opening chapter of her third, forever-unfinished novel *Why Do the Heathen Rage?* appeared in the July 1963 *Esquire*. "Everything that Rises Must Converge" won the 1962 O. Henry Award; "Revelation" won it in 1964; *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was published in a French translation; and O'Connor received honorary degrees from Smith College and from Saint Mary's, the women's college of Notre Dame. Her name on a book's cover—as opposed to a lurid or intriguing illustration—was sometimes now given greater prominence than the title: in 1963, the New American Library released *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and the two novels in a single volume titled *Three by Flannery O'Connor*.

Obviously, O'Connor's continuing fictional output affected her reputation. Before examining the reaction to her next collection of stories, however, a brief consideration of a

nonfiction work O'Connor composed before her death can further illuminate the ways in which she was regarded at this time. In 1961, O'Connor composed an introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, a work written by the Dominican Nuns who staffed the Our Lady of Perpetual Help Free Cancer Home in Atlanta. Although this introduction is read and discussed more by O'Connor's ardent admirers than by her casual fans, its composition and reception offer a glimpse of her reputation at this time.

The memoir's titular figure arrived at the Home when she was three and remained there until her death, at the age of twelve, from a cancerous tumor that dominated her face. The nuns who cared for Mary Ann found her an inspiring example of God's grace and asked O'Connor to compose the memoir herself, but O'Connor demurred, instead agreeing to edit the work and write an introduction. In terms of O'Connor's output, the introduction reflects both her unflinching style (its opening sentence, for example, states, "Stories of pious children tend to be false"¹) and favorite themes, such as the idea that all human life is like Mary Ann's, filled with mystery and preparation for death. In terms of O'Connor's reputation, the introduction suggests, even by virtue of O'Connor's having been asked to write the memoir herself, how her literary stock had risen. Many of the memoir's reviewers mentioned the introduction and described O'Connor with phrases such as "brilliant Southern novelist"² and "a professional writer by stature and a Catholic."³ O'Connor was also often noted as the perfect antidote to the potential mawkishness of the subject and assumptions about her character, based upon how they regarded her previous works, were fully in play in these reviews. The most representative example of

¹ O'Connor, introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann* by The Dominican Nuns of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Home (Savannah: Frederic C. Beil, 1991), 3.

² John J. Quinn, S.J., review of *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, *Best Sellers* 21 (December 15, 1961), 394, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 178.

³ Celestine Sibley, "Nuns Tell Inspirational Story, Convey 'Mystery' in Child's Life," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* (November 15, 1961), B7, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 176.

these assumptions in action is a review by Edward F. Callahan for the *Boston Pilot*, in which he admits that the subject matter “gives the reader the fear that the book will be an orgy of saccharine equal to the mid-Victorian tearjerkers,” putting one in the mind of Little Nell, but then states that “the book is not as sentimental as one might anticipate” and that the nuns who asked O’Connor to edit their manuscript “were inspired and extremely fortunate” that O’Connor brought her unsentimental outlook to Mary Ann’s story: “In the editing of this memoir,” Callahan noted, “Miss O’Connor has obviously used a broad, blue pencil with the end result being a book of a much greater power than its subject or its literary predecessors might suggest.”⁴ The same tendency of the reviewer to call upon what he assumed, from her work, to be O’Connor’s character was found other reviews, such as a short one in the *Savannah Morning News Magazine* that describes the Dominican nuns approaching O’Connor and asking her to write the book herself: “We can imagine Miss O’Connor’s dilemma,” the reviewer states, “for all who know her gothic style would know that this was not exactly her medium.”⁵ Clearly, O’Connor’s thematic concerns and artistic performance were felt to be well-recognized to the point where reviewers could imagine, with confidence, how she would respond to a text. Such is one effect of an established reputation and an effect that, we shall see, was found in much of the critical reaction to *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. O’Connor’s name on the cover of both the hardcover (Fig. 10) and paperback reprint (Fig. 11) thus lent the book the a “literary” air without which it may have been, in the case of the initial release, ignored or, in the case of the paperback, dismissed as being as sentimental as its cover art.

⁴ Edward F. Callahan, “In and Out of Print: Death of a Holy Innocent,” *Boston Pilot* (January 27, 1962), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 181.

⁵ A.C.H., “Emissary of Love,” *Savannah Morning News Magazine* (January 7, 1962), 9, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 180.

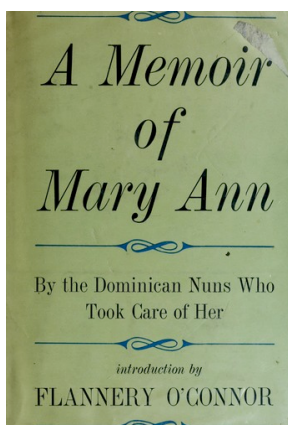


Figure 10

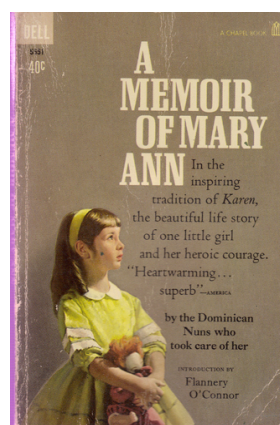


Figure 11

O'Connor herself spent her last few months in and out of the hospital and died of kidney failure on August 3, 1964. The news of O'Connor's death as reported by the AP wire and reprinted in hundreds of newspapers offered a bare-bones summary of her career:

"MILLEDGEVILLE, GA (AP)—Flannery O'Connor, short-story writer and novelist who suffered from a chronic crippling illness, died Monday at the age of 39. In 1959, Miss O'Connor was one of 11 American writers to receive a Ford Foundation grant."⁶ The UPI obituary was similar in tone and slightly longer, mentioning the same items and adding, "Many of her characters, Southerners, were freak prophets, men of limited background who felt a supernatural call to preach."⁷ (The characterization of figures such as Tarwater here suggests that the author of this obituary was a member of O'Connor's ironic audience, examined in the previous chapter.)

The *New York Times* featured the headlines, "Flannery O'Connor Dead at 39; Novelist and Short-Story Writer; Used Religion and the South as Themes in Her Work; Won O. Henry Awards." The *Times* obituary erased any tension between the ironic and genuine authorial audiences or between those who found her unreadable and those who found her prophetic:

⁶ Obituary of Flannery O'Connor, *The Indiana Gazette*, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Aug 4, 1964, 13.

⁷ "Deaths Elsewhere: Novelist O'Connor," *The Washington Post*, August 4, 1964, B4.

In Miss O'Connor's writing were qualities that attract and annoy many critics: she was steeped in Southern tradition, she had an individual view of her Christian faith and her fiction was often peopled by introspective children. But while other writers received critical scorn for turning these themes into clichés, Miss O'Connor's two novels and few dozen stories were highly praised.⁸

The author elaborated on the UPI writer's idea concerning O'Connor's characters, describing them as "Protestant Fundamentalists and fanatics."⁹ Again, as with the case of Mason Tarwater, we see a reviewer tip his or her hand through the use of the "F-word." And *Time* magazine, ever ironic towards O'Connor and her fiction, described her in its "Milestones" section as an "authoress of the Deep South, an impassioned Roman Catholic from the Georgia backwoods who...explored the South's religious curiosities, finding among them...an appalling collection of lunatic prophets and murderous fanatics."¹⁰ O'Connor and members of her genuine authorial audience would certainly contest this description of what she had "found" while writing her fiction.

Local periodicals further south spoke of O'Connor in different terms. In its very headline, The *Macon Telegraph* emphasized O'Connor's Georgian roots: "Baldwin Author Claimed By Death." The obituary begins, "Flannery O'Connor, whose short stories and novels reflected deep inner feelings and conflicts of common people, died early Monday."¹¹ The vague description of O'Connor's work here might be a nod to decorum: if one cannot say something nice, it is better to say nothing at all. Like other obituaries, this one emphasizes O'Connor's fortitude, an aspect of her personality that would become a permanent part of her reputation: "Nothing in her writings ever reflected the severely handicapping ailment which had struck

⁸ "Flannery O'Connor Dead at 39," *New York Times*, August 4, 1964, 29.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Milestones," *Time*, August 14, 1964.

¹¹ "Baldwin Author Claimed By Death," *Macon Telegraph*, August 4, 1964, 1-2.

her.”¹² The *Atlanta Constitution* spoke of her, in an obituary titled “Flannery O’Connor Leaves Inspiration,” as almost another Mary Ann, “so quietly did she live among us.”¹³ The *Baldwin News* described Andalusia as “something of a mecca [*sic*] for writers, journalists, students of creative writing and their professors.”¹⁴ One obituary appearing in an Alabama newspaper suggests the degree to which Southern readers were still—forty years later—smarting from Mencken’s scorn of the “Sahara of the Bozart” and how O’Connor could still be used as a means of extolling a Southern culture that those north of the Mason-Dixon line could never understand. *The Anniston Star* eulogized O’Connor in a way that recalled those initial reviews of *Wise Blood* that implied that the book was more nonfiction than novel:

Although she may not have enjoyed the fame in her home country that she deserved, Flannery O’Connor, the Georgia novelist and short-short writer who died this week, won international respect as the voice of the South.

A kind and gentle person and an invalid for much of her life, Miss O’Connor knew intimately the people of her Southland and she wrote of them with honesty and understanding.

Her two novels, “*Wise Blood*” and “*The Violent Bear It Away*” and her book of short stories, “*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*,” told the world more about this part of the country than the voluminous outpourings of many of the more commercially popular “voices.”¹⁵

That this appeared on the editorial page seems appropriate, as the obituary reads more like a defense of Southern culture and complaint that it has been inaccurately represented. One wonders how or even whether the writer of this obituary had read O’Connor’s work, since the desire to claim characters such as Mr. Head, the Misfit, and Manley Pointer as evidence of an

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Flannery O’Connor Leaves Inspiration,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 4, 1964.

¹⁴ “Death Takes Novelist Flannery O’Connor, Funeral Rites Slated For This Morning,” *Baldwin News*, August 4, 1964, 1.

¹⁵ “Flannery O’Connor,” *The Anniston Star*, August 6, 1964, 4.

honest and “understanding” look at the South might seem akin to Venetians wanting to claim Iago as a favorite son.

After her death, the student editors of *Esprit*, the University of Scranton’s literary magazine, devoted the entire winter 1964 issue to O’Connor. This may not, at first, seem like a major tribute. However, this issue of *Esprit* is invaluable to anyone examining the history of O’Connor’s reputation because its faculty advisor, the Rev. John J. Quinn, S.J., solicited opinions and reminiscences about O’Connor from dozens of critics, scholars, and authors, many of them established names. O’Connor had a friendly relationship with Quinn and *Esprit*: she had judged the magazine’s first short story contest and published her essay “The Regional Writer” in its pages. Quinn maintained a correspondence with O’Connor and also visited her mother after O’Connor’s death, which he noted in the issue’s foreword, thanking “Mrs. Edward F. O’Connor and her charming family for the gracious hospitality extended *Esprit* on the occasion of its unforgettable week-end (Oct. 30-Nov. 2, 1964) visit to Andalusia, the O’Connor Farm outside Milledgeville, Georgia.”¹⁶ One of the student editors, John F. Judge, recently noted that Quinn was “the drive and inspiration” for O’Connor’s presence in the university’s courses and revealed an interesting fact that calls to mind the Mason-Dixon issues mentioned in chapter 1: “Although he knew it would be impossible for any northern university to be even considered, Quinn actually made an effort to establish the University of Scranton as the Flannery O’Connor Library.”¹⁷ The relationship between the magazine and O’Connor was thus a substantial one; that the University of Scranton is a Jesuit institution certainly did not hamper the degree to which O’Connor’s ideas and art would receive a fair hearing. The eighty-eight page volume is invaluable in tracing the history of O’Connor’s reputation; despite its 2005 reissue (in

¹⁶ John J. Quinn, foreword, *Esprit: A Journal of Thought and Opinion* 8 (Winter 1964), 2.

¹⁷ John F. Judge, email message to author, February 9, 2013.

slightly-different form) by the University of Scranton Press, it has not been examined at any great length by scholars or biographers.¹⁸

The issue begins with a preface by Quinn proclaiming the magazine's mission to extol O'Connor's artistic and personal virtues, "Lest the Prophet be without honor in her own terrestrial country."¹⁹ This declaration is followed by an opening essay, "The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor," in which University of Scranton professor John J. Clarke argues that O'Connor's importance lay in her readjusting general notions of Catholic literature. Noting that "we have had too narrow a notion of what Catholic art might embrace," Clarke states that O'Connor "has expanded our view, even if it should be the verdict of time that the sensational situations of her stories transgress artistic limits" and that, regardless of how one reacts to the content of her work, "In the persisting paucity in America of Catholics who are good fiction writers, her absence will be sorely felt."²⁰ The issue also contains three extended critical analyses of O'Connor's work, a comparison of her work with Dostoevsky's, line drawings inspired by scenes and characters from her fiction, six poetic responses to O'Connor (among them "A Celt Sleeps," an excruciating imitation of Robert Burns), and two pieces of short fiction seemingly unrelated to O'Connor's style or thematic concerns. The issue, for the most part, attempts to serve as an instruction manual for O'Connor's work, with a number of professors offering declarative statements such as, "The theme of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is free will"²¹ or, "The significance of Flannery O'Connor is to be found...in her insistence upon the

¹⁸ In the publisher's preface to the reissued version, one learns that as O'Connor's fame increased, a demand arose for back issues of this edition of *Esprit* that continued "until the entire stock was depleted." Publisher's preface, *Flannery O'Connor: A Memorial* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 1995), 2.

¹⁹ Quinn, "Flannery O'Connor's Country," *Esprit*, 4.

²⁰ John J. Clarke, "The Achievement of Flannery O'Connor," *Esprit*, 9.

²¹ Rev. Leonard F. X. Matthew, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 34.

primacy of ideas.”²² Clearly, one aim of the issue was to help readers appreciate what the editors, with their fingers on the presumed pulse of O’Connor’s reputation, had already discovered.

The critical heart of this issue of *Esprit*, however, is “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” a collection of reminiscences and testimonials that Quinn solicited in the immediate wake of her death. Of the forty-nine pieces of commentary gathered here, nine were previously-published in such periodicals as *The New Yorker* and the *New York Times*. All are arranged alphabetically, save one: a reminiscence of O’Connor made, via telephone, by Katherine Anne Porter, which appears last in the collection, interspersed with photographs of Andalusia. To emphasize the value of Porter’s words, the editors gave them their own title (“Gracious Greatness”) and noted, “*Esprit* expresses its special gratitude to Miss Porter for telephoning—from her sick bed in her Washington home—the following reminiscence of Miss O’Connor.”²³ Other notable contributors of original commentary included Elizabeth Bishop, Kay Boyle, Cleanth Brooks, Caroline Gordon, Elizabeth Hardwick, John Hawkes, Granville Hicks, Frank Kermode, Robert Lowell, Andrew Lytle, Robie Macauley, Thomas Merton, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Eudora Welty. Some of the authors gathered here suggest the importance of O’Connor’s work more by their presence than their actual words, as in the case of Saul Bellow, whose contribution, in full, reads, “I was distressed to hear of Miss O’Connor’s death. I admire her books greatly and had the same feeling for the person who wrote them. I wish I were able to say more, but it isn’t possible just now.”²⁴ The Catholic novelist J. F. Powers supplied a similarly brief set of remarks:

²² P. Albert Duhamel, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 22.

²³ Introduction to “Gracious Greatness,” *Esprit*, 50.

Flannery O'Connor was an artist blessed (and cursed) with more than talent. In a dark and silly time, she had the great gift—the power and the burden—of striking fire and light. She was one of those rare ones, among writers, whose life's work was not in vain.²⁵

Such words of praise offer, as Polonius describes those of amorous young men, more light than heat, but these are outnumbered by longer, more complex offerings. An examination of this part of the magazine suggests that the trends and ideas about O'Connor's reputation that would later surface in reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* were already in embryonic form.

The first of these trends was the interest in treating O'Connor's reputation as a subject as worthy of comment as her work itself and the desire to correct presumed prevailing notions of her place in American letters. Those who rose to this challenge of setting the record (as they saw it) straight were the professors. Charles Brady, of Canisius College, noted, "One of the biggest difficulties in assessing contemporary literary reputations is the tendency to praise an emerging writer for the wrong reasons"²⁶ and that praising O'Connor as another McCullers or Capote was off the mark (and, in fact, far from actual praise). Robert Drake, of the University of Texas, similarly complained that labels such as "Southern Gothic novelist" or "a Roman Catholic Erskine Caldwell"²⁷ were inadequate and inexact. James F. Farnham, at Western Reserve University, wrote, "Miss O'Connor is an artist, and Catholicism is one of her 'circumstances,'"²⁸ just like her Southern address. Sr. Mariella Gable, of the College of St. Benedict, complained that O'Connor was "carelessly lumped with other outstanding Southern writers as another

²⁴ Saul Bellow, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 13.

²⁵ J. F. Powers, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 40.

²⁶ Charles Brady, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 16.

²⁷ Robert Drake, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 19.

²⁸ James F. Farnham, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 23.

purveyor of the gratuitously grotesque.”²⁹ Louis D. Rubin, then Professor at Hollins College, insisted that O’Connor “did not write in the shadow of Faulkner, or of anyone else.”³⁰ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., of the University of Chicago, called “Southern Gothic” a “foolish rubric”³¹ to use when thinking about O’Connor. Finally, Robert Penn Warren, then at Yale, noted, “She is sometimes spoken of as a member of the ‘Southern school’ (whatever that is), but she is clearly and authoritatively herself.”³² Other authors included in *Esprit* argued that O’Connor’s reputation initially suffered because her first readers were not ready for a voice as original as hers. For example, Elizabeth Hardwick stated that O’Connor was “indeed, a Catholic writer, also a Southern writer; but neither of these traditions prepares us for the oddity and beauty of her lonely fiction.”³³ Caroline Gordon, one of O’Connor’s closest friends to whom she regularly sent drafts of her work, accurately summarized much of O’Connor’s early reception when she noted, “We do not naturally like anything which is unfamiliar. No wonder Miss O’Connor’s writings have baffled the reviewers—so much so that they have had reached for any *cliché* they could lay hold of in order to have some way of apprehending this original and disturbing work.”³⁴ The clichés Gordon mentioned and which the previously-quoted professors sought to correct were the watchwords that were beginning to show signs of strain: “Southern Gothic Catholic female novelist” seemed, as a description, to carry less weight than it did a decade ago.

²⁹ Sr. Mariella Gable, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 25.

³⁰ Louis D. Rubin, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 44.

³¹ Nathan A. Scott Jr., “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 45.

³² Robert Penn Warren, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 49.

³³ Elizabeth Hardwick, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 30.

³⁴ Caroline Gordon, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 28. Emphasis in original.

One cliché, however, that was just gaining ground in its contribution to O'Connor's reputation was that her illness was somehow responsible for her art—an idea that, in the wake of her death, proved irresistible to many readers and would gain traction a few months later in the reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. In what might be the most presumptuous of the appreciations gathered in *Esprit*, Brother Antonius (the poet and critic William Everson) noted, “Doubtless the facts of her personal life enabled her to confront the problem of violence in the search for understanding.” After acknowledging of these “facts,” however, “I do not know what they were,” Everson explained, “there was in her work an affinity to the humanity of her characters that could only have come from deep suffering.”³⁵ As Caroline Gordon noted, many readers would reach for any cliché—here, the one of the Suffering Artist—to make sense of O'Connor's work. Elizabeth Hardwick mentioned O'Connor's “secluded life,”³⁶ an untrue characterization that, we will see, gained ground but does not illuminate O'Connor's work; others mention what one author calls a “beautiful soul in an afflicted body”³⁷ which similarly illuminates very little of O'Connor's actual character in anything but saccharine terms. Robie Macauley, then editor of *The Kenyon Review* and an acquaintance of O'Connor, also attempted some psychoanalysis in the name of reputation-building:

Much of her life must have been a torment. She wrote hard and re-wrote even more painfully; her terrible affliction was with her for many years. It is no wonder that her great subject was the anti-Christ—the fierce and bestial side of the human mind. She treated it with a confused and emotional hatred.³⁸

That O'Connor experienced great physical pain is not debatable; that “much of her life must have been a torment” certainly is. Macauley's desire to account for O'Connor's art is exactly the

³⁵ Brother Antonius, “Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 13.

³⁶ Elizabeth Hardwick, “Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 28.

³⁷ J. Franklin Murray, S. J., “Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 37.

³⁸ Robie Macauley, “Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 34.

kind of thinking against which Caroline Gordon protested and which, a year later, would surface in many reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

Other contributors to “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute” offered their opinions of O’Connor’s character as means of accounting for the moral courage they assumed she required to tackle her chosen subjects. Cleanth Brooks’s comment, “I find it hard to separate the person from the artist” since “the character of both was an invincible integrity,”³⁹ reflects the ways in which many other contributors praised O’Connor’s “enduring courage,”⁴⁰ “toughness,”⁴¹ and “bravery.”⁴² Robert Lowell described O’Connor as “a brave one, who never relaxed or wrote anything that didn’t cost her everything.”⁴³ Laurence Perrine, the Professor at Southern Methodist University whose textbooks became standard-issue in thousands of English courses, related an anecdote in which he wrote to O’Connor, asking her why, in “Greenleaf,” she had named Mrs. May as she did. His description of O’Connor’s reply emphasizes the image of the gruff yet endearing O’Connor found throughout the pages of *Esprit*:

Miss O’Connor’s reply, dated June 6, 1964, was written from a hospital in Atlanta, Georgia, a bare two months before her death. She answered, in a kindly letter that must have given her trouble to write at all, “As for Mrs. May, I must have named her that because I knew some English teacher would write and ask me why. I think you folks sometimes strain the soup too thin.”

I still feel a pleasant ache where my wrist was thus lightly slapped by so gallant a lady.⁴⁴

³⁹ Cleanth Brooks, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 17.

⁴⁰ Kay Boyle, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 16.

⁴¹ Elizabeth Bishop, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 16.

⁴² Warren Coffey, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 18.

⁴³ Robert Lowell, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 33.

⁴⁴ Laurence Perrine, “Flannery O’Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 40.

The general effect of such testimonials is the continued fostering of O'Connor as a stoic figure and an intertwining of the artist's personality and subject matter. In the hopes of illuminating O'Connor's strength, Katherine Anne Porter engaged in a kind of physiognomic appreciation that would resurface in reviews of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*: in her description of O'Connor's self-portrait, Porter states that "the whole pose fiercely intent gives an uncompromising glimpse of her character."⁴⁵ In another appreciation, Sr. Mariella Gable states, "I have never known one so habitually at home with the truth."⁴⁶ The assumption that underlies so much of "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute" is that O'Connor knew the truth and the truth had made her tough.

There are, however, some voices included in the tribute that balance the overwhelming portrayal of O'Connor as similar in temperament to old Mason Tarwater. The novelist John Hawkes emphasized that O'Connor closed all of her letters with "Cheers," a word which, he argued, "represents the attitude she took towards life" and suggested the "economy, energy, pleasure and grace" she infused into her fiction. Very aware of O'Connor's reputation as a firebrand, Hawkes noted, "So now it seems important to stress the sprightly warmth and wry, engaging, uninhibited humanity of a writer commonly described as one of America's coldest and most shocking comic writers."⁴⁷ In a short offering, critic and professor Francis L. Kunkel similarly stressed the importance of O'Connor's reputation in terms of her "often overlooked" humor, noting that she resembled Waugh and Powers but that she demonstrated "the ability to

⁴⁵ Katherine Anne Porter, "Gracious Greatness," *Esprit*, 50.

⁴⁶ Gable, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 27.

⁴⁷ John Hawkes, "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute," *Esprit*, 30.

treat religious matters with humor.”⁴⁸ Not all readers viewed the ability to explore deep, spiritual matters and make a reader laugh as mutually exclusive.

This issue of *Esprit* is also important to O'Connor's reputation because it reflects the growing connection between the peacock and O'Connor's image. The peacock, as O'Connor knew, has had a long association in Catholic art with the Holy Spirit, an association she used to her artistic advantage in “The Displaced Person.” In “Living with a Peacock,” a lighthearted essay appearing in the September 1961 issue of *Holiday* magazine and later reprinted in *Mystery and Manners* as “The King of the Birds,” O'Connor described how a “mild interest” in raising chickens became “a passion, a quest”⁴⁹ that led her to collecting peafowl. The very cover of *Esprit* reinforced the association between O'Connor and the peacock (Fig. 12), as does the issue's final selection, a poem titled, “The Peacock and the Phoenix” which features a maudlin peacock lamenting, “Fair Authoress, only thirty-nine, / You died before your finest line.”⁵⁰ In her contribution to *Esprit*, Sr. M. Joselyn, a professor from the College of St. Scholastica, states, “I would not say that the peacock is in any way a *symbol* of Flannery O'Connor, or she of it. But the association is there.”⁵¹ The peacock is now as much a part of O'Connor's reputation as butterflies are to Nabokov's or the French Poodle, Charlie, is to Steinbeck's—perhaps even more so, since one can hardly find a modern work by or about O'Connor that does not, on its cover, visually reference her favorite fowl (Figs. 13-17). Combining elements of her life on a farm, her religious themes, personal eccentricities, and outsider status, the peacock has proved the perfect icon for O'Connor's readers, critics, and biographers. The peacock has thus become a form of

⁴⁸ Francis L. Kunkel, “Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 33.

⁴⁹ O'Connor, “The King of the Birds,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 4.

⁵⁰ Bernard A. Yanavich, Jr., “The Peacock and the Phoenix,” *Esprit*, 82.

⁵¹ Sr. M. Joselyn, “Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute,” *Esprit*, 31.

reputation-shorthand that has only grown more ubiquitous over time—a phenomenon the editors of *Esprit* could not have predicted but which they certainly helped accelerate.

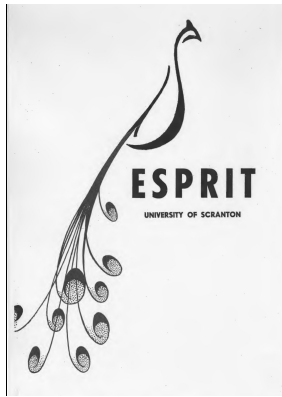


Figure 12 (1964)

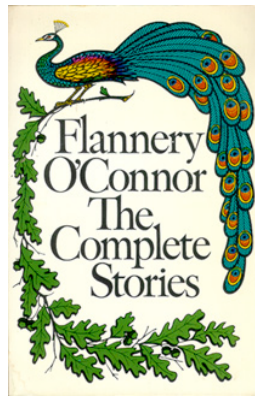


Figure 13 (1971)



Figure 14 (1984)



Figure 15 (2002)

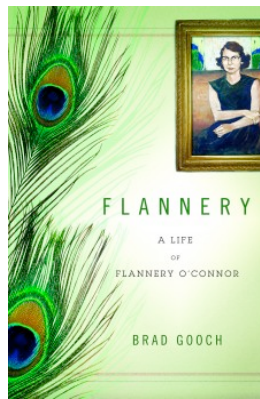


Figure 16 (2010)

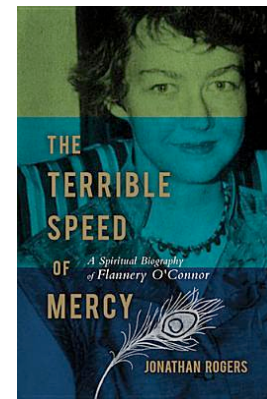


Figure 17 (2012)

Everything That Rises Must Converge

In April 1965, nine months after O'Connor's death, Robert Giroux published *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, O'Connor's second collection containing nine stories, all of which were previously published individually except for "Judgment Day," a reworking of her first story, "The Geranium." Many of the original reviewers understandably wrote of O'Connor's recent death, making their reviews sound like eulogies as much as critical assessments. In the *New York Times*, for example, Charles Poore noted that O'Connor "died at the height of her

promise,”⁵² while a reviewer for the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* lamented the death of a writer “so young and with so much more to tell a world which needed to hear it.”⁵³ A writer for the *Arizona Republic* reasoned that “since most of what she wrote was an improvement over what had gone before, there is no knowing how far she might have progressed had she been allowed more than 39 years on this earth.”⁵⁴ *Newsweek* described her death as “a measureless loss”⁵⁵ and, in what may be the most flattering (or hyperbolic, depending on one’s taste) comparison thus far in the story of O’Connor’s reputation, the novelist and editor R. V. Cassill stated, “Miss O’Connor did not die quite as young as Keats, but she will keep, in our minds, a place reminiscent of his.”⁵⁶ In the twelve years since the publication of *Wise Blood*, reviewers felt comfortable in speaking of O’Connor’s work as a “permanent part of American literature”⁵⁷ or agreeing with Alan Pryce-Jones’s assessment—now found as a blurb on the back covers of paperback editions of O’Connor’s work—that “There is very little in contemporary fiction which touches the level of Flannery O’Connor at her best.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the assertion that “Flannery O’Connor’s is a voice that time will never still”⁵⁹ is representative of her postmortem reputation as the creator of works that would endure long after the death of their author. Earlier in her

⁵² Charles Poore, “The Wonderful Stories of Flannery O’Connor,” *New York Times*, May 27, 1965, 35.

⁵³ Eugenia Thornton, “A Mask of Virtue Hides Wickedness,” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, June 13, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 252.

⁵⁴ Rex Barley, “Flannery O’Connor’s Legacy of Fiction—Short Stories,” *Arizona Republic*, May 23, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 212.

⁵⁵ “Grace Through Nature,” *Newsweek*, May 31, 1965, 85-86, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 231.

⁵⁶ R. V. Cassill, “A Superb Final Effort,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 13, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 245.

⁵⁷ “Grace Through Nature,” 231.

⁵⁸ Alan Pryce-Jones, “A Poignant Knowledge of the Dark,” *New York Herald Tribune*, May 25, 1965, 23, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 217.

⁵⁹ Riley Hughes, “Books in the Balance,” *Columbia* 45 (July 1965), 34, 36, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 274.

career, O'Connor's reputation as a Southern and, especially, a Catholic writer was gradually developed to the point where these terms gained critical currency; now, after her death, she was being eulogized as a Southern and Catholic writer who escaped "either catalogue through her own genius."⁶⁰ The old watchwords which seemed so perfect and so strong were beginning to show their seams.

However, this is not to suggest that there was a seismic shift in the way O'Connor was perceived by her critics: a number of issues found in the reviews of O'Connor's previous works surfaced, even more strongly, in those of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. The South as a setting for universal themes was again noted by many reviewers: the *National Observer* stated that O'Connor's setting and characters "take on the dimensions of every time, every place, and every man,"⁶¹ while the *Wall Street Journal* called O'Connor "truly a writer for all seasons and times."⁶² Even the *New Yorker*, which had panned *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* a decade earlier, begrudged in a mixed review that "her province is Christendom rather than the South."⁶³ Other reviewers argued much the same,⁶⁴ but, in a moment that recalls the action of those writers for *Esprit* who began commenting on O'Connor's reputation as much as her work, a reviewer for

⁶⁰ Unsigned review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, *Newsday*, May 29, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 224.

⁶¹ Robert Ostermann, "A World Without Love, as Seen by Miss O'Connor," *National Observer*, June 28, 1965, 19, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 260.

⁶² Eric Lloyd, "Reading for Pleasure," *Wall Street Journal*, July 9, 1965, 8.

⁶³ Naomi Bliven, "Nothing But the Truth," *New Yorker* 41 (September 11, 1965), 220-21, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 286.

⁶⁴ Paul J. Hallinan, Archbishop of the Diocese of Atlanta, wrote of O'Connor, "She wrote of the South, but her vision was of the world." (*Georgia Bulletin*, August 12, 1965, 8, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 278.) An unsigned review in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* stated O'Connor's new stories "are set in the South that their author knew so well, but each of them has a universality that makes all of them true to life anywhere." (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, May 16, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 210.) Walter Sullivan stated that "the South as locale and source was quite peripheral." ("Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: *Everything That Rises Must Converge*," *Hollis Critic* 2, September 1965, 1-10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 295.) The most expansive praise of O'Connor's universality may be a remark from *Choice*: "Miss O'Connor's real region may not be the South, but Teilhard's noosphere." (*Choice* 2, September 1965, 387, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 294.)

Georgetown magazine remarked, “It is unfortunate that Flannery O’Connor has been tagged as a Southern writer and / or a Catholic writer, for what she has to say has universal significance.”⁶⁵ She was still routinely compared to Faulkner, Welty, and McCullers, but also now to Dante, whom one reviewer named as O’Connor’s “classical mentor.”⁶⁶ In *Jubilee*, fellow-Catholic and best-selling author Thomas Merton topped even this superlative when he compared her to Sophocles in a quotation that became the blurb featured on the book’s dust-jacket.⁶⁷ Her work was again recommended (as in *Booklist*) for “the discriminating reader”⁶⁸ and her sex could still surface as worthy of comment: “Though feminine in spirit,” a reviewer in Atlanta remarked, “Miss O’Connor writes with a firm masculine hand. No story would identify her sex.”⁶⁹ Finally, one can still find the theme of local-girl-makes-good: an article in the Milledgeville *Union-Recorder* spoke proudly of the fact that the collection was introduced by “Harvard professor”⁷⁰ Robert Fitzgerald and then offered readers a series of laudatory selections from major newspapers and magazines, sometimes (as in the case of *Time*), judiciously selecting only those sentences that would read as unmitigated accolades for *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and O’Connor’s career as a whole.

⁶⁵ Marilyn M. Houston, “Potomac Reader,” *Georgetown*, June 24, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 259.

⁶⁶ William Kirkland, “Posthumous O’Connor,” *Charleston Gazette*, July 19, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 270.

⁶⁷ “When I read Flannery I don’t think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Sartre, but rather of someone like Sophocles. What more can be said of a writer? I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft which shows man’s fall and his dishonor.” Thomas Merton, “Flannery O’Connor: A Prose Elegy,” *Jubilee* November 1964. Reprinted in *A Thomas Merton Reader* (New York: Doubleday, 1989, 257).

⁶⁸ Unsigned review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, *Booklist* 61, July 1, 1965, 1015, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 264.

⁶⁹ Ralph Bergamo, “Gallant Georgian’s Legacy,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 23, 1965, B2, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 213.

⁷⁰ Florence Moran, “Top Newspapers and Magazines pay Tribute to Flannery O’Connor,” *Milledgeville Union-Recorder*, June 10, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 244.

While praise for the new collection was strong and widespread, an examination of the reviews also yields a common complaint that could only be leveled against a writer with an already-established reputation and known body of work: specifically, the charge that O'Connor's talents were, however striking, essentially limited. Writing in *The Nation*, for example, Webster Schott stated, "Artistically her fiction is the most extraordinary thing to happen to the American short story since Ernest Hemingway," but he also called O'Connor "myopic in her vision."⁷¹ Schott's assessment is representative of a critical habit seen in this period that marked and sometimes marred O'Connor's reputation: what many reviewers gave with one hand—the praise of her artistic performance—they took away with the other by complaining of her "limited" subject matter. The assumption underlying many critical complaints was that an author's proscribed thematic concerns somehow devalued his or her career as a whole. However problematic such an assumption might be, it was one that informed much critical discussion of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and O'Connor's subsequent reputation. Walter Sullivan stated that O'Connor's "limitations were numerous and her range was narrow,"⁷² assuming that one mark of literary success was the tackling of a number of different subjects; writing in *Jubilee*, Paul Levine described O'Connor's achievement as "austerely limited."⁷³ Both of these reviewers, however, acknowledged that what O'Connor did, she did very well: Sullivan acknowledged that "her ear for dialogue, her eye for human gestures

⁷¹ Webster Schott, "Flannery O'Connor: Faith's Stepchild," *The Nation* 201 (September 13, 1965), 142-44, 146, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 290-91.

⁷² Walter Sullivan, "Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: *Everything That Rises Must Converge*," *Hollins Critic* 2 (September 1965), 1-10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 295.

⁷³ Paul Levine, "Flannery O'Connor's Genius," *Jubilee*, October, 1965, 52-53, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 301.

were as good as anybody's"⁷⁴ and Levine similarly described O'Connor's "vision" as "deep rather than wide."⁷⁵

This simultaneous faulting of O'Connor's breadth while praising her depth is found in many of the collection's original reviews. Writing in *Commentary*, Warren Coffey argued that O'Connor "would not go wider than her ground" but that "nobody could have gone deeper there."⁷⁶ Richard Poirier, in the *New York Times Book Review*, stated, "Miss O'Connor's major limitation is that the direction of her stories tends to be nearly always the same," yet ended his review with the bold statement that "Revelation," the story which earned O'Connor the 1964 O. Henry Award, "belongs with the few masterpieces of the form in English."⁷⁷ This notion of O'Connor's limits—what amounts to a new aspect of her reputation at this time—was durable enough to survive an Atlantic crossing: a long but unsigned review in the *Times Literary Supplement* cautioned against "sentimental exaggeration" when judging O'Connor and described her as a "*provincial* writer in the truest sense," a "major handicap" which "meant that she *knew* only half the world she lived in and wrote about."⁷⁸ Faulkner, this reviewer argued, possessed both the talent and thematic treasure to earn him the reputation he enjoyed: he "had a powerful enough imagination to supply a great deal of vicarious experience. Miss O'Connor, we must acknowledge, lacked this power: her imagination worked excellently within her experience but

⁷⁴ Sullivan, "Flannery O'Connor, Sin, and Grace: *Everything That Rises Must Converge*," 295.

⁷⁵ Levine, "Flannery O'Connor's Genius," 301.

⁷⁶ Warren Coffey, "Flannery O'Connor," *Commentary* 40 (November 1965), 93-99, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 307.

⁷⁷ Richard Poirier, "If You Know Who You Are You Can Go Anywhere," *New York Times Book Review* 70 (May 30, 1965), 6, 22, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 226-27.

⁷⁸ "Memento Mori," *Times Literary Supplement*, March 24, 1966, 242, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 317. Emphasis in original.

did not rise above its limitations.”⁷⁹ A reviewer for the London *Observer* similarly stated that “within her limits, Miss O’Connor brings off some notable feats of impersonation.”⁸⁰ Ironically, another author whose reputation was forever linked to the violence in one of his early works offered a complete counterstatement to this prevailing idea: writing in *The Listener*, the weekly publication of the BBC, Anthony Burgess noted of the stories, “The range is astonishing.”⁸¹

Just as the readers quoted above found O’Connor limited in her thematic concerns, others found her wanting in her artistic performance. Irving Howe detected in O’Connor’s work “a recurrent insincerity of tone” in the ways in which she portrayed characters he assumed she despised, most notably Julian, the failed writer and smug intellectual in the collection’s title story: “Miss O’Connor slips from the poise of irony to the smallness of sarcasm, thereby betraying an unresolved hostility to whatever it is she takes Julian to represent.”⁸² Similarly, in *Southern Review*, Louis D. Rubin argued that “Miss O’Connor loads the dice” and “makes her sinners so wretchedly obnoxious one can’t feel much compassion for their plight.”⁸³ Such a complaint about O’Connor’s limiting the three-dimensionality of her characters is one that would later surface elsewhere, most notably in Harold Bloom’s introduction to his *Twentieth Century Views*, where he argues that O’Connor’s detestation of Rayber, the smug and secular

⁷⁹ Ibid., 318.

⁸⁰ John Coleman, “Small Town Miseries,” *London Observer*, March 27, 1966, 27, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 321.

⁸¹ Anthony Burgess, “New Fiction,” *The Listener* 75 (April 7, 1966), 515, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 324.

⁸² Irving Howe, “Flannery O’Connor’s Stories,” *New York Review of Books* 5 (September 30, 1965), 16-17, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 292.

⁸³ Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “Southerners and Jews,” *Southern Review* 2 (1966), 697-713, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 332.

schoolteacher in *The Violent Bear It Away*, is so strong that she “cannot bother to make him even minimally persuasive.”⁸⁴

However, at the time of O’Connor’s death, such reviews about the limitations of both her form and content were outnumbered by those proclaiming her to be “a remarkable artist”⁸⁵ and “one of the most gifted artists of our time.”⁸⁶ But while O’Connor’s admirers naturally argued that the praise she earned was wholly justified, there was an undercurrent of critical thought reflected in the discussion of “limits” that suggested much of the praise needed to be qualified. Writing in *Ave Maria*, Thomas Hoobler noted that many reviewers were anxious to not speak ill of O’Connor because of the circumstance of her recent death:

The reviewers thus far seem reluctant to take on the book as a work of art to be critically reviewed. Miss O’Connor’s growing reputation...and possibly the fact of posthumous publication, has produced a kind of awe, even among normally skeptical reviewers...Needless to say, this reviewing-by-assent is a high compliment to Miss O’Connor’s gift, but hardly, I think, an appropriate comment on her work.⁸⁷

Hoobler’s words here accurately capture the spirit of many of the reviewers of this period, who came to praise O’Connor as they buried her.

What is also striking about this phase of O’Connor’s reputation is that it had developed to the point where it was as much examined by contemporary readers as the work upon which it was presumably based, as if the critics began gazing upon themselves. A single review can be examined as representative of this greater phenomenon. In one of the first reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Stanley Edgar Hyman, as literary critic for *New Leader*, offered a

⁸⁴ Harold Bloom, introduction to *Flannery O’Connor: Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*, 2.

⁸⁵ John S. Kennedy, “A Sense of Mystery,” *Catholic Transcript*, June 3, 1965, 5, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 234.

⁸⁶ John J. Quinn, S.J., “Short Stories,” *Best Sellers* 25 (June 1, 1965), 124-25, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 233.

⁸⁷ Thomas Hoobler, “Feature Review,” *Ave Maria* 102 (July 17, 1965), 18, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 266.

long appreciation of O'Connor's career and death, "the cruelest loss to our literature since the death of Nathaniel West."⁸⁸ After a mostly-positive assessment of the collection, Hyman expanded the scope of his review by identifying what he regarded as O'Connor's chief themes, among them the presence of evil and the gulf between the human and divine. His review then shifts into a mode in which he corrects what he viewed as the prevailing misconceptions about her work: "Few contemporary writers have been as much misunderstood, wrongly praised, and wrongly damned as Miss O'Connor."⁸⁹ Hyman argues that while readers spoke of her violence as excessive and that O'Connor "did come to rely on death too often to end her stories,"⁹⁰ her problem was a reliance on melodrama more than on the violence with which her work was associated. Hyman similarly discriminates between the ways in which O'Connor's work was labeled "grotesque" and what it actually was: "Grotesque her fiction is," Hyman states, "but it is never gratuitous...it is perfectly functional and necessary."⁹¹ Hyman ends his review by introducing an idea about O'Connor that would take root and flourish as one of the most striking blooms of her current reputation:

To judge Miss O'Connor by any criteria of realism in fiction, let alone naturalism, is to misunderstand her...The writer she most deeply resembles in vantage point is West. He saw deeply and prophetically because he was an outsider as a Jew, and doubly an outsider as a Jew alienated from other Jews; she had a complete multiple alienation from the dominant assumptions of our culture as a Roman Catholic Southern woman.⁹²

⁸⁸ Stanley Edgar Hyman, "Flannery O'Connor's Tattooed Christ," *New Leader*, May 10, 1965, 9-10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 207.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁹² *Ibid.*

This is not the first time in print that O'Connor and West were linked: reviews of *Wise Blood* mention the stylistic affinities between these two writers' work.⁹³ This was, however, the first time in which O'Connor and West were linked as outsiders, an aspect of O'Connor's reputation that continued throughout her posthumous publishing career and which remains very strong today. For example, a 1991 appreciation of *The Collected Stories* in the *Times Literary Supplement* begins with the often-told tale of how the five-year-old O'Connor trained a chicken to walk backwards, a feat captured on film by Pathé News and regarded as representative of O'Connor's future focus on "freakish creatures" with "their sense of direction all askew."⁹⁴ In the opening pages of his biography, Brad Gooch employs this anecdote to suggest that it reflects the ways in which O'Connor produced work "running counter to so much trendy literary culture."⁹⁵ Other biographers have employed the same anecdote for the same reason of portraying O'Connor as an outsider. In the opening pages of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, Paul Elie's 2003 joint biography of O'Connor, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, and Walker Percy, Elie describes the chicken as "a freak, a grotesque" that resembled O'Connor's characters and the author herself:

Solitary, strange, physically weakened, often misunderstood, and yet sustained by a belief, so strong as to be religious, that she was exceptionally gifted, Flannery O'Connor was so unique as to seem to others a kind of freak; and her girlhood encounter with the Pathé cameraman from New York was her conversion to the grotesque and the freakish, the moment in which she came to firsthand experience of the phenomenon she would write about.⁹⁶

⁹³ One representative example from a review of *Wise Blood*: "The style itself, incidentally, is reminiscent of everyone and no one—Erskine Caldwell and Nathaniel West, among others, come strongly to mind at various points—but what is here is very much Miss O'Connor's own." Carl Hartman, "Jesus Without Christ," *Western Review* 17 (Autumn 1952), 75-80, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 21.

⁹⁴ Ann Hulbert, "A Generation of Wingless Chickens," *Times Literary Supplement*, May 3, 1991, 20, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 466.

⁹⁵ Gooch, 9.

⁹⁶ Elie, 14.

Hyman's review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* is thus a moment when an idea that would later gain great currency was first presented to readers. Unsurprisingly, this idea was also known to O'Connor, who described herself as "an object of considerable curiosity, being a writer about 'Southern degeneracy' and a Catholic at once [sic] and the same time."⁹⁷

This notion that O'Connor's reputation deserved attention and, at times, needed correcting is found in other reviews besides Hyman's; the frequency with which these kind of moments occur—and that they began occurring so frequently in these postmortem examinations—suggests a desire among many of O'Connor's readers to "fix" her reputation, in the sense of "repair" but also "make permanent." As we have seen in other chapters, sometimes a small, seemingly unimportant notice in an easily-overlooked source illuminates greater issues just as well as the pronouncements of notable critics in major periodicals: in this case, an unsigned review in the Kansas *Emporia Gazette* states, "Already a Flannery O'Connor legend is taking shape."⁹⁸ This "legend" was one which many critics attempted to address in their reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. Many reviewers spoke of O'Connor's reputation as a fact of nature, calling her "One of the truly skilled, original, and polished talents of our time"⁹⁹ or claiming that the "superb craftsmanship" of her work is such that O'Connor "can match any American writer of the century."¹⁰⁰ A reviewer for the *Nashville Banner* stated, "Her reputation is one of the largest among Southern writers, and she is considered 'must' reading on many

⁹⁷ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 20 April 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 216.

⁹⁸ Unsigned review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, *Emporia Gazette* [Kansas], July 30, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 272.

⁹⁹ Roy Newquist, "A Lament for Flannery," *Chicago Heights Star*, May 27, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 217.

¹⁰⁰ Bergamo, 213.

college campuses,”¹⁰¹ but other reviewers argued that O’Connor’s reputation needed to be clarified: writing in the *New York Times*, Charles Poore noted that O’Connor was “mindlessly categorized as a ‘Southern writer,’”¹⁰² just as an unsigned review in *Newsday* states, “A Southern writer, a Catholic writer, Miss O’Connor escapes either catalogue through her own genius.”¹⁰³ Again, a reader sees how the watchwords “Southern” and “Catholic,” once used as if they were the Rosetta Stone to unlocking the secret of O’Connor’s strange art, were now, barely a decade later, proving inadequate to the task of accounting for the creation of characters such as Rufus Johnson and O. E. Parker. Finally, in an interesting yet revealing aside in his *Cross Currents* review, James F. Farnham compared O’Connor to Faulkner not in terms of content or region, but in that of reputation:

It was not too long ago that Flannery O’Connor’s production was thought by some to be satisfactorily categorized by the flip label of “Southern Gothic.”...Early criticism of another Southern writer, William Faulkner, was frequently as uncordial, but in the case of both, time showed them to be something other than practitioners of Gothic horrors.¹⁰⁴

Lawrence H. Schwartz’s 1988 *Creating Faulkner’s Reputation: The Politics of Modern Literary Criticism* has proven Farnham correct: while the story of Faulkner’s reputation contains more drama (such as the ways in which the publishing of popular fiction changed during the Second World War) and cultural reverberations (such as the ways in which an “elitist aesthetic” arose that demanded literature be “difficult”), Faulkner’s reputation was, like O’Connor’s, eventually one that moved from a writer with specific regional concerns to one whose art transcended time

¹⁰¹ Howell Pearre, “Posthumous Collection of Southern Stories,” *Nashville Banner*, May 28, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 221.

¹⁰² Poore, “The Wonderful Stories of Flannery O’Connor,” 35.

¹⁰³ Unsigned review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, *Newsday*, May 29, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 224.

¹⁰⁴ James F. Farnham, “The Essential Flannery O’Connor,” *Cross Currents* 15 (Summer 1965), 376-78, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 280.

and space. While many authors today are celebrated for reflecting the experiences of those of a specific race, nationality, sexuality, or any number of other seemingly-defining characteristics, at the time of O'Connor's death one of the highest complements that could be paid to an author was to claim that she transcended such categories and spoke to the widest possible audience.

Another major factor that influenced O'Connor's reputation at this time came from the pen of poet and translator Robert Fitzgerald, whose introduction to *Everything that Rises Must Converge* stands as a case study in how one author can affect the reputation of another.

O'Connor had signed a contract for the collection with Robert Giroux in 1964, in between visits to the hospital. Realizing she was too ill to revise all of the stories, she decided that their previously-published magazine and journal versions would have to suffice, although she did revise "Revelation" and "Parker's Back" while in Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta, initially hiding the manuscripts under her pillow for fear of being told that such activity was forbidden and then working on them for two hours a day in her room.¹⁰⁵ After she died, Giroux arranged for the quick publication of the collection, which featured Thomas Merton's previously-quoted comparison to Socrates on its dust-jacket. He also solicited the assistance of Robert Fitzgerald, O'Connor's close friend, to introduce the collection.¹⁰⁶

O'Connor first met Fitzgerald and his wife, Sally, in 1949, when O'Connor was living in New York City and revising *Wise Blood*. Their friendship was immediate; that same year, O'Connor left New York to live at the Fitzgeralds' farm in Connecticut, where she paid sixty-five dollars a month for rent, lived in furnished rooms above the garage, worked on *Wise Blood*

¹⁰⁵ See Gooch, 365-367 and Sally Fitzgerald, "Chronology" in *Flannery O'Connor: Collected Works* (New York: The Library of America, 1988), 1256.

¹⁰⁶ When asked who decided that Fitzgerald would compose an introduction, biographer Jean W. Cash stated that "the friendship between O'Connor and the Fitzgeralds cannot be overestimated" and that "speaking with Giroux, the two would have collectively decided that Fitzgerald would write the introduction." Jean W. Cash, email message to author, January 20, 2013

each morning, and babysat the Fitzgeralds' children each afternoon. Such an arrangement worked well for O'Connor's novel, but also forged a relationship that both the Fitzgeralds and O'Connor prized for the rest of their lives. In a 1954 letter to Sally, O'Connor informed her that she was dedicating *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* to her and Robert "because you all are my adopted kin and if I dedicated it to any of my blood kin they would think they had to go into hiding."¹⁰⁷ She and the Fitzgeralds spent many nights discussing writers, their own families, and their works-in-progress. That the Fitzgeralds were also practicing Catholics also cemented the bonds of friendship. While her stay with the Fitzgeralds was short—within a year she had moved to Milledgeville because of her health—her relationship with them only grew stronger: she served as Godmother (with Giroux as Godfather) to their third child, met them in Italy during her trip to Lourdes, and named Robert as her literary executor.

Robert Fitzgerald was thus an "O'Connor insider" and his being chosen to introduce the collection was a means by which Giroux sought to steer the reader's understanding of O'Connor's character and work in a way that those who best knew her would approve. His introduction is no simple blurb or general impression: it is, instead, a seventeen-page combination of biography, criticism, and reminiscence—the kind of introduction modern readers might expect but which, as Jean W. Cash notes, "gave readers the first significant biographical information about O'Connor."¹⁰⁸ The introduction sustained many aspects of O'Connor's reputation at that time and gave reviewers guidance on how best to assess the work of a writer so strange and seemingly at odds with many aspects of literary modernity. An analysis of Fitzgerald's activity here reveals an act of reputation-engineering motivated by insight, respect, and friendship.

¹⁰⁷ O'Connor to Sally Fitzgerald, 26 December 1954, in *The Habit of Being*, 74.

¹⁰⁸ Cash, 318.

Fitzgerald establishes his *bona fides* early in his introduction by describing all of the O'Connor-related places he has been and with whom he has shared his memories of the writer. He states that he has visited O'Connor's grave with her mother and spent afternoons at the Cline house (where O'Connor's mother, Regina, was raised) and Andalusia many times. One paragraph begins, "I have been in the dining room looking at old photographs with Regina,"¹⁰⁹ while another begins, "I have also been in the front room of the other side of the house, Flannery's bedroom, where she worked."¹¹⁰ Such moments, combined with his description of how he and Sally first met O'Connor in 1949, suggests an intimacy with the recently-deceased and the opposite of the clichéd professor opining to a group of students. Fitzgerald downplays his own career as a professor of English at Princeton and Harvard, instead fostering an ethos of a friend more than a critic. However, his desire to instruct and, at times, redirect the course of O'Connor's reputation is evident from the number of assertions he makes about her art. Consider this anecdote appearing early in the introduction:

Once when I was working at a university I was asked by a couple of my friends who taught there to take part in a symposium on Flannery's work, a symposium I expected would be favorable if critical, but it turned out that one of my friends didn't like her work at all because he thought it lacked a sense of natural beauty and human beauty. Troubled by this, I looked in the stories again and took a sentence from "The Artificial Nigger" to say what I felt she perceived not only in natural things but in her characters: "The trees were full of silver-white sunlight, and even the meanest of them sparkled." Surely even the meanest of them do. I observed that in the violent tale called "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" the least heroic of the characters was able, on his way to be shot, to shout a reassurance to his mother (though supporting himself against a tree) and that his wife, asked if she would like to follow him, murmured "Yes, thank you," as she got up with her baby and broken shoulder. These were beautiful actions, I argued, though as brief as beautiful actions usually are.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Robert Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, by Flannery O'Connor (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1965), x.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid., xii.

Whether or not these actions are “beautiful” or instead the result of humans operating under tremendous fear is debatable and could be the subject of a classroom discussion. Still, the idea that O’Connor could be regarded as a writer whose work expressed “natural and human beauty” was one that ran counter to the notions (seen in early reviews) of her as a writer in whose work “horror is undiluted,”¹¹² whose characters are “devoid of honor, loyalty, and for the most part, decency,”¹¹³ or was simply, as the chorus of reviewers often sang, “grotesque.”

Fitzgerald also sustains or qualifies some of the then-currently-held contentions about O’Connor. He mentions that she motivated him to read both *Miss Lonelyhearts* and *As I Lay Dying*, noting that “they were the only two works of fiction that I can remember her urging on to me, and it is pretty clear from her work that they were close to her heart as a writer.”¹¹⁴ He also calls “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” a “triumph over Erskine Caldwell and a thing of great beauty,”¹¹⁵ correcting any readers who may have still regarded O’Connor’s setting confined to Tobacco Road and alluding to Keats in emphasizing the “beauty” of O’Connor’s work. Like other critics, he also mentions O’Connor’s struggles with lupus—but not before first offering an explanation of how the disease works, an explanation that, again, establishes his credentials as one close to O’Connor and whose opinions are sound:

Disseminated lupus, as it is technically called, is an auto-immune disease in the same general group as arthritis and rheumatic fever. The trouble is that the body forms antibodies to its own tissues. It is primarily a blood vessel disease and can affect any organ; it can affect the bones. I have these details from Dr. Arthur J. Merrill in Atlanta, who pulled Flannery through that first onset with blood

¹¹² Martha Smith, “Georgian Pens *Wise Blood*, A First Novel,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 18, 1952, F7, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 7.

¹¹³ “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 31 (Autumn 1955), ci, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 59.

¹¹⁴ Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xv.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, xx.

transfusions and was able to arrest the disease with injections of a cortisone derivative, ACTH, in those days still in the experimental stage.¹¹⁶

For the remainder of his introduction, Fitzgerald intertwines O'Connor's medical and creative lives, suggesting that as the former deteriorated the latter grew stronger. He does not, unlike other initial readers of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, ascribe any inspirational force to O'Connor's illness, but instead uses it to portray O'Connor's own lack of the kind of sentimentality concerning death found in many original reviews:

She was at the Piedmont Hospital in Atlanta for a month in May and June. I had no notion that she was seriously ill until a note came from her with a new anecdote of farm life and the single sentence, "Ask Sally to pray that the lupus don't finish me off too quick." Late in July she was taken to the Milledgeville hospital with a severe kidney failure, and she died there in a coma on the morning of August 3.¹¹⁷

Fitzgerald viewed O'Connor's reaction to her illness as an example of how strongly she sought to maintain her artistic integrity despite her situation. She had, according to Fitzgerald, "fought a good fight and been illuminated by it"¹¹⁸—an idea very close to O'Connor's assertion that "sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe."¹¹⁹

The final pages of Fitzgerald's introduction instruct readers how to approach the stories collected there as well as her work in general. Unlike dozens of critics before him, Fitzgerald compares O'Connor not to the usual suspects, but instead to T. S. Eliot, the first time in print that such a comparison was made (but not the last). Fitzgerald argues that both Eliot and O'Connor raise "anagogical meaning over literal action" and even remarks that Eliot "may have felt this himself, for though he rarely read fiction I am told that a few years before he died he read her

¹¹⁶ Ibid., xvii.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., xxv.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 28 June 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 163.

stories and exclaimed in admiration of them.”¹²⁰ (Time has proven Fitzgerald’s story here to be correct: in 1979, Russell Kirk wrote of his recommending her work to Eliot, who read it and responded in a letter, “She has certainly an uncanny talent of a high order but my nerves are just not strong enough to take much of a disturbance.”¹²¹) Of course, the number of readers who understood Eliot’s work well enough to grasp Fitzgerald’s notion of his “analogical meaning” in relation to O’Connor’s is impossible to determine; still, one senses Fitzgerald’s desire to bolster O’Connor’s reputation through such a comparison. More accessible to the general reader is Fitzgerald’s argument about O’Connor’s “limits”—a topic, as we have seen, seized upon by many of the collection’s reviewers and which Fitzgerald may have anticipated by virtue of his discussing it in his introduction. After pointing out the similarities between O’Connor’s previous work and the stories in this collection, Fitzgerald admits that “the critic will note these recurrent types and situations,” how “the setting remains the same” and how “large classes of contemporary experience...are never touched at all.”¹²² But he also warns that those who find this a weakness are themselves limited in their understanding of O’Connor’s work:

In saying how the stories are limited and how they are not, the sensitive critic will have a care. For one thing, it is evident that the writer deliberately and indeed indifferently, almost defiantly, restricted her horizontal range; as pasture scene and a fortress of pine woods reappear like a signature in story after story. The same is true of her social range and range of idiom. But these restrictions, like the very humility of her style, are all deceptive. The true range of the stories is vertical and Dantesque in what is taken in, in scale of implication.¹²³

As the previous survey of the original reaction of reviewers to the collection suggests, many readers either ignored Fitzgerald’s advice here or simply did not read it, complaining of

¹²⁰ Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xxx.

¹²¹ Russell Kirk, “Memoir of Humpty Dumpty” in *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* 8 (1979), 14-16. Quoted in Cash, 214.

¹²² Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xxxii.

¹²³ Ibid.

O'Connor's repetitious plots, character types, and themes. Fitzgerald's assertion that the supposed limits were actually a deliberate restriction, the better to focus on a "scale of implication" akin to Dante's inferno, is his attempt to "fix" O'Connor's reputation in a manner of which he, as her friend and genuine authorial reader, approved. His long-term success in this regard can be seen in a recent book about O'Connor that points out the similarities among all of her stories but urges that "the significant focus" is "a vertical relationship, the individual with his or her Maker, rather than a horizontal involvement, individuals in community with each other."¹²⁴ Others may have faulted O'Connor for not creating more three-dimensional characters, but to Fitzgerald, this, again, was not a limitation: "She could make things fiercely plain."¹²⁵

Fitzgerald's introduction was noted in several original reviews of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*. Most of the critics simply mentioned it as a feature of the text and many lauded it as a "wise and intelligent"¹²⁶ or "valuable and perceptive"¹²⁷ introduction but did not say much else about it. Others praised Fitzgerald's introduction (a critic for the *Providence Journal* described it as "gentle and objective enough to become a classic piece of criticism"¹²⁸) and either quoted it at length or mentioned the same elements of O'Connor's life and art as Fitzgerald, making them star pupils in Fitzgerald's imaginary classroom. These reviews often offered more wholehearted praise and, more importantly as a measure of Fitzgerald's influence, an echo of his

¹²⁴ Margaret Earley Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), 114-115.

¹²⁵ Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xiii.

¹²⁶ Minnie Hite Moody, "Last, Rare Fruitage of Fine, Brave Talent," *Columbus Dispatch*, June 6, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 240.

¹²⁷ Hughes, "Books in the Balance," 274.

¹²⁸ Nancy A. J. Porter, "Flannery O'Connor's Last Stories," *Providence Journal*, June 13, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 251.

themes and assertions. Writing in *Best Sellers*, John J. Quinn, the force behind the Winter 1964 issue of *Esprit*, stated that Fitzgerald's "penetrating introduction to the artist as a person and as an artist qualifies him as the expert curator of the O'Connor Gallery,"¹²⁹ while another noted Fitzgerald's "valuable" introduction, stating, "he gives a gratifyingly clear portrait, and it is apparent that he understands fully what she was about in her writing."¹³⁰ Only one of the original reviewers found fault with Fitzgerald, arguing that the strength of O'Connor's art was that while it was "Catholic, but not obtrusively or aggressively so," Fitzgerald's introduction was "obtrusively Catholic, unfortunate and misleading."¹³¹ This assessment, however, was the exception to the general rule. The inclusion of an introduction, the choice of Robert Fitzgerald to compose it, and the timing of such an essay all converged to steer O'Connor's reputation to an even more prominent place. In his biography, Paul Elie describes Fitzgerald's introduction as "mannered and overwrought," yet acknowledges that it "served many readers that year as the first portrait of the artist" and fixed her reputation more firmly as readers such as the Fitzgeralds and Giroux wished: "No longer would Flannery O'Connor be mistaken for a gentleman or a rural primitive. She was a woman, and a literary saint."¹³²

Despite his friendship with O'Connor—or perhaps because of it—Fitzgerald was not above engaging in some revisionist reputation history. When describing the publication of *Wise Blood*, Fitzgerald states:

The reviewers, by and large, didn't know what to make of it. I don't think anyone even spotted the bond with Nathaniel West. Isaac Rosenfeld in *The New Republic* objected that since the hero was plain crazy it was difficult to take his religious

¹²⁹ John J. Quinn, S.J., "Short Stories," 233.

¹³⁰ Thomas Hoobler, "Feature Review," 268.

¹³¹ Patrick Crutwell, "Fiction Chronicle," *Hudson Review* 18 (Autumn 1965), 442-50, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 308.

¹³² Elie, 375.

predicament seriously. But Rosenfeld and everyone else knew that a strong new writer was at large.¹³³

As we have seen in the survey of *Wise Blood*'s original reviews, not "everyone" knew that "a strong new writer was at large." In fact, Rosenfeld himself was dismissive of O'Connor's talents and he complained in his review that O'Connor's novel suffers from a lack of clarity, confused religious ideas, and a style that he found "inconsistent" with the idea that "there is no escaping Christ."¹³⁴ That none of this is mentioned here is hardly shocking and perhaps understandable: Joyce Carol Oates noted in 1965 that O'Connor's early death had "perhaps obscured critical judgment."¹³⁵ Perhaps—but what is certain is that O'Connor's death obscured, for some, the memory of how she was first received, as seen in a review appearing in *Newsweek*:

With her first novel, *Wise Blood*, it was clear that a major writer had arrived; and this conviction was confirmed by the first collection of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. With her second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away*, nearly all doubters were converted to passionate belief.¹³⁶

The very phrasing of the *Newsweek* reviewer echoes Fitzgerald's style and content, as it does his tendency to speak in absolutes. O'Connor's status as a "major writer" may have been clear to the reviewer, but, as we have seen, not to all those who first encountered her work, such as O'Connor's writing instructor at Georgia State College for Women, who reflected the sentiments of many original reviewers when she said of *Wise Blood*, "When I read her first novel I thought to myself that a character who dies in the last chapter could have done the world a great favor by dying in the first chapter instead."¹³⁷

¹³³ Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xviii.

¹³⁴ Isaac Rosenfeld, "To Win by Default," 19-20.

¹³⁵ Joyce Carol Oates, "Flannery O'Connor's Tragic People," *Detroit Free Press*, August 22, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 279.

¹³⁶ "Grace Through Nature," 232.

What is interesting to one examining the history of O'Connor's reputation is that the cause of her death, her eventual succumbing to the systemic lupus erythematosus with which she was diagnosed in 1951, added its own aura to "the O'Connor legend." Had she died in an automobile accident, her death would have still affected her reputation; that she died because of a slowly-working disease about which relatively little was known allowed critics to link her illness with her art in ways they found clever or interesting but which O'Connor, while alive, found repulsive. Writing to Maryat Lee in 1960, O'Connor fumed, "I don't want further attention called to myself in this way. My lupus has no business in literary considerations."¹³⁸ The occasion was a review in *Time* of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* which described her as a "bookish spinster" and one whose suffering would have seemed to prevent her from writing: "She suffers from lupus (a tuberculous disease of the skin and mucous membranes) that forces her to spend part of her life on crutches. Despite such relative immobility, author O'Connor manages to visit remote and dreadful places of the human spirit."¹³⁹ The reviewer is incorrect in both his description of lupus and his assumption that O'Connor's medical condition was somehow responsible for her subject or thematic concerns. The "relative immobility" of which the reviewer speaks was never experienced by O'Connor at this time. She did need a cane and, eventually, two crutches to walk, but she was far from a bedridden victim: from 1955 (the year *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was published) to 1963 (the year before her death), O'Connor flew to New York City to appear on television, toured Europe for seventeen days with her mother, gave dozens of talks at universities as far as Notre Dame and the University of Chicago, and visited a number of states as far from Georgia as Texas, New Orleans, and Minneapolis.

¹³⁷ William Schmmel, "Southern Comfort," *Travel-Holiday* (June 1988): 72. Quoted in Gooch, 208.

¹³⁸ O'Connor to Maryat Lee, 5 March 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 380.

¹³⁹ "God-Intoxicated Hillbillies," *Time* (February 29, 1960), 118.

Granted, she did much of this traveling with the assistance of her crutches, and sometimes found it trying, but she was no Emily Dickinson deliberately shutting herself away from the world or, as V.S. Pritchett inaccurately described her in the *New Statesman*, “an invalid most of her life.”¹⁴⁰ Still, O’Connor’s lupus and its imagined psychological effects became a large part of her reputation, to the point that her death from the incurable disease proved irresistible to many reviewers seeking to, once again, “explain away” O’Connor and account for the strangeness of her art. To many critics, her illness had become her muse, an explanation for her choice of themes and manner of exploring them.

For example, one particularly mawkish reviewer wrote that O’Connor’s “personal awareness of death” was so strong that her readers could “sense the shock of identification that Flannery O’Connor must have felt when one of her characters succumbed to his grisly fate. It is as if the author is telling the same story over and over in the hope that it will go away.”¹⁴¹ As he complained of O’Connor’s bitter portrayal of “weak humans,” Louis D. Rubin ascribed what he viewed as O’Connor’s artistic failings to her illness: “Any human being who had to endure what Flannery O’Connor did for the last years of her all-too-brief life...would certainly have tended to view the human condition with more than the customary amount of distrust.”¹⁴² A reviewer for the *British Association for American Studies Bulletin* attempted to account for the power of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* on medical and psychoanalytic, rather than artistic grounds:

It is a book conceived of by a dying woman who is not afraid of going to hell: she’s been in it too long and has begun to find it cozy and dull. Flannery

¹⁴⁰ V. S. Pritchett, “Satan Comes to Georgia,” *New Statesman* 71 (April 1, 1966), 469, 472, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 322.

¹⁴¹ Joseph Nicholson, “Stories Adhere to Grotesque Theme,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, June 20, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 258.

¹⁴² Louis D. Rubin, Jr., “Southerners and Jews,” 332.

O'Connor was imprisoned in a wracked body for most of her creative life. Hopelessly sick, bald, and deformed, she writes with a vengeance... Her books are impartial, unsparing, and hilariously beyond despair. She is the only true ghost writer. Having lost all, she invited you to join her in the realm of the hopeless.¹⁴³

Anyone who reads O'Connor with even a modicum of charity will recognize the falseness of these claims, for her fiction as a whole dramatizes the folly of what she viewed as a trendy, modern nihilism—consider Hulga in “Good Country People” as one of many examples of O'Connor attacking what she viewed as a hollow hopelessness. Without the hope of a place where he “counts,” Bevel (in “The River”) is simply a drowned boy; without the hope of Heaven, men turn into Misfits.¹⁴⁴ The reviewer for the *Times Literary Supplement* also engaged in perpetuating the idea of lupus-as-muse, noting, “She is writing of death, of its meaning to life, from the depths of her experience of gradually dying.”¹⁴⁵ This idea that O'Connor was motivated by her “experience of gradually dying” is one that O'Connor would have mocked, perhaps arguing that she had been engaged in this “experience,” like everyone else, since birth: as she has her mouthpiece, Old Mason Tarwater, says to his great-nephew, “The world is made for the dead. Think of all the dead there are... There's a million times more dead than living and the dead are dead a million times longer than the living are alive.”¹⁴⁶ Few American writers were as aware of our “gradually dying” than the creator of the Misfit; to suggest that O'Connor's lupus, more than her imagination, was responsible for her fiction is another example of the continuous desire to account for and explain away O'Connor's uncanny art, a desire that affected her reputation with the publication of each new book.

¹⁴³ Rene Jordan, “A Southern Drawl From Beyond the Grave,” *British Association for American Studies Bulletin* 12-13 (1966), 99-101, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 331.

¹⁴⁴ In a letter, O'Connor wrote, “I think that the church is the only thing that is going to make the terrible world we are coming to endureable.” O'Connor to Betty Hester, 20 July 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 90.

¹⁴⁵ “Memento Mori,” 318.

¹⁴⁶ O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 16.

All of the arguments against these views however, illuminate another aspect of reputation history: the notion that the pervasiveness of a reputation can be measured by the degree to which those living after the subject presume to know what he or she would have said or thought about a given issue or idea. This phenomenon is hardly confined to literature: the relatively recent phenomenon of T-shirts, baseball caps, and bracelets asking, “WWJD?” or “What Would Jesus Do?” has become so widespread that its very phrasing can be found in the titles of books such as *What Would Lincoln Do?* (2009), *What Would Audrey [Hepburn] Do? Timeless Lessons for Living with Grace and Style* (2008) and *What Would Google Do? Reverse-Engineering the Fastest Growing Company in the History of the World* (2011). Of course, the answer to “What Would Jesus Do?” when applied to a contemporary social or political issue will more likely reveal more about the person answering the question than it will about the Biblical figure. In any event, this kind of hypothetical guessing game—specifically, the invocation of an “imagined O’Connor”—found its way into the assessments of O’Connor’s career, suggesting that her reputation was firm enough that critics felt comfortable speaking for her and assuming they understood what she would have said. For example, writing in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger*, Louis Dollarhide stated, “She would be the first to object to the lachrymose acceptance of this collection on the basis of its being her last. She would insist that the stories stand on their own merits—or not at all.”¹⁴⁷ The imagined O’Connor was also invoked by a writer for the *Roanoke Times* who quoted R. L. Stevenson’s wish to have battled with death in a field rather than in a sickbed and then stated, “Such a valiant statement could have been made by Flannery

¹⁴⁷ Louis Dollarhide, “Earlier Review Lacking in Understanding,” Jackson *Clarion Ledger* [Mississippi], June 13, 1965, F10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 249.

O'Connor.”¹⁴⁸ Robert Fitzgerald, in his introduction, begins a paragraph with, “She would be sardonic over the word *ascesis*, but it seems to me a good one”¹⁴⁹ to describe O'Connor's style. In what might be the perfect example of an imagined O'Connor based upon her reputation, Edward M. Hood, writing in *Shenandoah*, began his assessment of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* with a study of the photograph found opposite the title page (Fig. 18), stating that it is “brilliant and unnerving, like the stories themselves” and that O'Connor's physical features reflect her art: she smiles, but her eyes are “slightly unmoored and stare from beneath glasses with a baleful intensity at some spectacle outside the range of our vision. It reminds me not a little of those prophet-freaks in her fiction.”¹⁵⁰ In *Macbeth*, King Duncan laments, “There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face”; here, Hood acts as if the art that Duncan mentions is easily practiced, at least in the case of authors. All one needs to do is familiarize



Figure 18

oneself with the works of the author in question, and her face will come to reflect her own thematic concerns.¹⁵¹ Incidentally, this was an idea that O'Connor herself mocked: she

¹⁴⁸ Esten Goolrick, “Hers Was a High Flute Played with Precision,” *Roanoke Times*, June 13, 1965, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 249.

¹⁴⁹ Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xxxii. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁰ Edward M. Hood, “Rural Georgia and the Starry Universe,” *Shenandoah* 16 (Summer 1965), 109.

described in a letter the experience of being photographed for *Jubilee*, stating that the frustrated photographer “finally came to the conclusion that he couldn’t take my picture because he senses too much resistance in me to letting my true self appear on my mug.”¹⁵²

Mystery and Manners

If the testimonials collected in *Esprit* reflect a general critical and national belief in the importance of O’Connor’s fiction and in her admirable character, the publication of *Mystery and Manners* in 1969 marked an even greater jump in O’Connor’s critical stock. This volume of occasional prose was assembled by Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, who collected and reshaped a number of O’Connor’s talks and lectures on the nature and practice of writing fiction; the collection also includes an essay that had originally appeared in *Holiday* magazine on raising peacocks, as well as the previously-mentioned introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*. Published by Robert Giroux four years after *Everything that Rises Must Converge* and five years after O’Connor’s death, *Mystery and Manners* marked a continuation of the course O’Connor’s reputation was taking from local oddball to literary oracle. The off-kilter specialist in regional grotesques had become a critic to be discussed in the same hushed tones as used when discussing Keats, Eliot, Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Pope, and Aristotle—all of whom reviewers used as comparatives in extolling O’Connor’s literary insight.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ This is not as odd or as uncommon as it may seem: in his 2004 biography, *Orwell: The Life*, D. J. Taylor devotes some space to Orwell’s uses of faces as well as Orwell’s own, recalling Orwell’s maxim, “At 50, everyone has the face he deserves.”

¹⁵² O’Connor to Betty Hester, 21 December 1962, in *The Habit of Being*, 503.

¹⁵³ In *Book Week*, O’Connor was compared to Eliot (Beverly Fields, “An Ethically Fearless Voice,” *Book Week*, May 18, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 359); in the *Wichita Falls Times* she was compared to Keats (“Southern Writer Stresses Creativity,” *Wichita Falls Times*, May 25, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 368); in *Catholic World* she was compared to Aristotle, Pope, and James (Charles J. Huelsbeck, “Of Fiction, Integrity, and Peacocks,” *Catholic World* 210 (December 1969), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 398); in *Sewanee Review* she was

However, the author to whom, at this point, reviewers most frequently compared her was Henry James, whom O'Connor herself referenced throughout her speeches and letters. One representative comparison was found in the *New Yorker*, which complained of the essays' repetitiousness yet ended by describing the book as "truer and sounder and wiser about the nature of fiction and the responsibilities of reader and writer than anything published since James's *The Art of the Novel*."¹⁵⁴ Clearly, this was high praise. As James's readers did when they read the Master's collected prefaces, many of O'Connor's readers viewed her pieces here as guides to her overall approach. Like James, O'Connor understood literature as a faithful record of life—"faithful" suggesting both O'Connor's desire to recreate the physical world of the senses and a world that reflected her own Catholic values and assumptions. James inspired the collection's title, which appears in O'Connor's essay, "The Teaching of Literature":

It is the business of fiction to embody mystery through manners, and mystery is a great embarrassment to the modern mind. About the turn of the century, Henry James wrote that the young woman of the future, though she would be taken out for airings in a flying-machine, would know nothing of mystery or manners. James had no business to limit the prediction to one sex; otherwise, no one can very well disagree with him. The mystery he was talking about is the mystery of our position on earth, and the manners are those conventions which, in the hands of the artist, reveal that central mystery.¹⁵⁵

Just as James's prefaces illuminate more than the specific novels they precede, many reviewers found the pieces in *Mystery and Manners* to likewise illuminate more than their author's own work: in the words of John J. Quinn, the collection should "rank with the precious few classical

compared to Thoreau (Miles D. Orvell, "Flannery O'Connor," *Sewanee Review* 78 (1970), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 400); in *Cross Currents* she was compared to Sidney, Wordsworth, Coleridge, James, Eliot, Dickens, and Hardy (James F. Farnham, "Flannery O'Connor and the Incarnation of Mystery," *Cross Currents* 20 (Spring 1970), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 408); and W. A. Sessions compared her to Blake (W. A. Sessions, *Studies in Short Fiction* 8 (1971), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 419).

¹⁵⁴ Unsigned review of *Mystery and Manners*, *New Yorker* 45 (July 19, 1964), 84.

¹⁵⁵ O'Connor, "The Teaching of Literature," in *Mystery and Manners*, 124.

studies on the art of fiction ever to be published.”¹⁵⁶ *Publisher's Weekly* described *Mystery and Manners* as “practically a handbook” of the art of writing fiction,¹⁵⁷ while many other periodicals featured reviewers exhorting “anyone interested in the craft of writing”¹⁵⁸ to read this “lucid and satisfying comment on the art of the short story and the nature of the storyteller’s gift.”¹⁵⁹

Writing in the *New York Times*, D. Keith Mayo described his immediate reaction to the collection as one of “gratitude”: “It seemed to me, it still seems, that I had never read more sensible and significant reflections on the art of writing.”¹⁶⁰ A writer for *Kirkus Reviews* described the book as “obligatory in understanding the quintessential aspects of the short story.”¹⁶¹ Many other reviewers echoed these sentiments. O’Connor’s opinions on art, like her themes, were now seen as transcendent, an aspect of her reputation that, as we shall see in chapter 6, maintains today.

But there was more to the reaction to *Mystery and Manners* than praise for O’Connor’s Jamesean insights into the art of fiction and its revelations of life. A closer examination of the critical reaction reveals that many readers viewed the collection as a means to understanding what they still regarded as her strange and challenging fiction, a figure in the carpet that would make the freaks less freakish and O’Connor’s fiction less threatening. As with *Wise Blood*,

¹⁵⁶ John J. Quinn, *Best Sellers* 29 (May 15, 1969), 76, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 358.

¹⁵⁷ Unsigned review of *Mystery and Manners*, *Publisher's Weekly*, November 10, 1969, 51, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 398.

¹⁵⁸ Valarie Edinger, “Articles and Essays By Flannery O’Connor,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, August 24, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 397.

¹⁵⁹ Maggie Irving, “The Presence of a Gift,” *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, June 22, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 376.

¹⁶⁰ D. Keith Mayo, review of *Mystery and Manners*, *New York Times Book Review*, May 25, 1969, 6-7, 20, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 367.

¹⁶¹ Unsigned review of *Mystery and Manners*, *Kirkus Reviews*, March 1, 1969, 289-90, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 347.

reviewers searched for a way to bring O'Connor's strangeness to heel; unlike the case with O'Connor's first work, they now had what they saw as a figurative key to O'Connor's kingdom, an assumption reflected in the very language they used to praise it. For example, writing in the West Virginia *Charleston Gazette*, W. M. Kirkland urged the collection on those who had been baffled by the likes of Hazel Motes or Mason Tarwater: "Readers who tried unsuccessfully to 'get anything out of' her novels and short stories, but who sensed that she was up to something, might well read these critical essays to see what Flannery O'Connor was really up to. She did, indeed, know what she was doing."¹⁶² The assumption here, that authors have secrets or, in the words of another reviewer, "something like a system"¹⁶³—and that *Mystery and Manners* could be used as a kind of literary enigma machine—is found in many of the book's original reviews. M. Thomas Inge, the historian of popular culture, praised the collection for reasons identical to Kirkland's: "Anyone who wishes to get at the heart of Miss O'Connor's impressive achievements as a fiction writer can do no better than to read these pieces. With remarkable clarity, they define her stance and explicate her intent in a way that second-hand criticism cannot match."¹⁶⁴ Inge later speaks of the book's "utilitarian value," again emphasizing the idea that *Mystery and Manners* was appreciated as a means to clarify the very mysteries mentioned in its title. Other reviewers offered the same idea: a writer for *Southern Review* called the essays "invaluable in providing abstract formulations of attitudes and values that are dramatized in the fiction."¹⁶⁵ In 1931, Leon Edel argued that James's prefaces were the equivalent of his "placing

¹⁶² W. M. Kirkland, "Flannery O'Connor's Last Essays," *Charleston Gazette* [W. Virginia], August 17, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 391.

¹⁶³ Saul Maloff, "On Flannery O'Connor," *Commonweal* 90 (August 8, 1969), 490-91, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 388.

¹⁶⁴ M. Thomas Inge, "Flannery O'Connor's Works Examined in New Critiques," *Lansing State Journal*, July 27, 1969, E7, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 386.

in the hands of the readers and critics the key to his work,” although “very few have ventured to place the key in the lock and open the door.”¹⁶⁶ By contrast, *Mystery and Manners* was often seen as an explanation of O’Connor’s *oeuvre*, or, as one reviewer described it, “a welcome gift, a tiny key to a door or two in a Southern mansion of wondrous beauty.”¹⁶⁷

This idea of *Mystery and Manners* as the key to O’Connor’s kingdom also manifested itself in critics’ selections of what passages from the book to quote and what to say about them when they did. The thirteen essays in the collection dealing with writing and fiction contain dozens of memorable sentences and maxims. However, the reviewers as a whole focused on only a small number of them as representative of the collection as a whole. Almost to a critic, the reviews feature one or more of the following four remarks from the collection:

1. “Whenever I’m asked about why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one.”¹⁶⁸
2. “When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist.”¹⁶⁹
3. “Everywhere I go I’m asked if I think the universities stifle writers. My opinion is that they don’t stifle enough of them. There’s many a best-seller that could have been prevented by a good teacher.”¹⁷⁰
4. “My subject in fiction is the action of grace in territory held largely by the devil.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁵ Fredrick P. W. McDowell, “Toward the Luminous and the Numinous: The Art of Flannery O’Connor,” *Southern Review* 9 (October 1973), 998-1013, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 426.

¹⁶⁶ Leon Edel, *The Prefaces of Henry James* (Folcroft, PA: The Folcroft Press, 1970), 15.

¹⁶⁷ Joe O’Sullivan, “Mystery and Manners,” *Springfield Republican* [Massachusetts], July 13, 1969, 68, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 385.

¹⁶⁸ O’Connor, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 44.

¹⁶⁹ O’Connor, “The Church and the Fiction Writer,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 146.

¹⁷⁰ O’Connor, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 84-85.

Each of these remarks reflects O'Connor's style: a frustration of the reader's expectation that results in something like a Chestertonian aphorism. Each makes its way into dozens of original reviews and is often spoken of as if it were a pronouncement that explained everything about what made O'Connor's art so compelling. For example, a writer for *Catholic World* quoted the second passage as evidence that O'Connor and other religious writers were not "brainwashed,"¹⁷² while John Raymond, in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, quoted the third as indicative of how O'Connor, like her fiction, "did not compromise...with what she took to be truth."¹⁷³ These epigrams functioned, for many, as reputation-enhancing sound bites, much like the epigrams of Johnson, Emerson, Thoreau, and Wilde have done in their cases. One's reputation is, in part, a function of how often one's memorable remarks are repeated and the degree to which they seem to illuminate one's work or character. The problem with such sound bites, of course, is that they are reductive and can reduce a reputation to a few formulae. As O'Connor noted in the context of a different discussion:

People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like the string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you can pick out the theme, the way you pick the right thread in the chicken-feed sack, you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. But this is not the way meaning works in fiction.¹⁷⁴

Reviewers of *Mystery and Manners* sometimes spoke of one of these four quotations, and frequently of the book as a whole, as if it were the thread that, once pulled, would explain O'Connor's art and personality.

¹⁷¹ O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," in *Mystery and Manners*, 118.

¹⁷² Charles J. Huelsbeck, "Of Fiction, Integrity, and Peacocks," *Catholic World* 210 (December 1969), 128-29, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 399.

¹⁷³ John Raymond, "Flannery O'Connor: She Wrote Because She Was Good at It," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 11, 1969, D10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 355.

¹⁷⁴ O'Connor, "Writing Short Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, 96.

So much about O'Connor's reputation had changed since 1952, but many of her reviewers, like the well-intentioned but misguided Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, still attempted to pluck out her mystery and demystify it. As we have seen since the publication of "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute" and the reception of *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, one means they employed to account for the mystery of O'Connor's art—another key—was her lupus. Many of the original reviews of *Mystery and Manners* mention her courage in the face of death and how this courage fueled her assertions about art. That O'Connor was "psychologically and ethically fearless"¹⁷⁵ because of her illness and that her illness gave her a "contempt for sentimentality"¹⁷⁶ was spoken of with great conviction by a number of reviewers. O'Connor's admirers viewed her (in the words of Jonathan Yardley) as "a woman inordinately complex and therefore fascinating"¹⁷⁷ because she was stricken with what critics often described with trepidation as a "strange and wasting disease."¹⁷⁸ O'Connor's lupus was, more than ever, tied to her reputation; in some hands, it catapulted her into near-saintliness. The theater and literary critic Richard Gilman (an acquaintance of O'Connor's) composed a long review for the *New York Review of Books* in which he stated that O'Connor's lupus "added to her disturbing, unaccountable aura" but also "put her against the wall, so that being interested in anything that wasn't fiercely to her purpose in the small space she had to operate in was a rare luxury,"¹⁷⁹ a modern corollary to Dr. Johnson's remark that when a man knows he is to be hanged in a

¹⁷⁵ Beverly Fields, "An Ethically Fearless Voice," *Book Week*, May 18, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 359.

¹⁷⁶ Saul Maloff, "On Flannery O'Connor," 390.

¹⁷⁷ Jonathan Yardley, "About Books," *Greensboro Daily News*, July 27, 1969, B3, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 386.

¹⁷⁸ Jeanne Rose, "Some Explanation of Herself," *Baltimore Sun*, July 6, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 383.

¹⁷⁹ Richard Gilman, "On Flannery O'Connor," *New York Review of Books* 13 (August 21, 1969), 24-26, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 395.

fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully. A. L. Rowse, like Gilman, also wrote of O'Connor's lupus in a major periodical; also like Gilman, he praised O'Connor's courage and tied it to her artistic production. "There was no room for self-pity in that courageous spirit," Rowse explained. "She too could have written, 'No coward soul is mine.'"¹⁸⁰ That Rowse, a man renown for his irascibility, could remark, "I do not often confess to being humble, but the combination of her genius and her spirit has ground me into humility"¹⁸¹ suggests the degree to which O'Connor's illness had worked on her readers to help transform her into what another British critic called "the saintly, secular nun of twentieth-century American literature."¹⁸²

The reviews of *Mystery and Manners* also reveal that, as was the case with "Flannery O'Connor—A Tribute" and *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, O'Connor's reputation had continued to develop as a subject worthy of its own critical notice and, at times, debate. Miles D. Orvell's evaluation in *Sewanee Review* begins, "It is getting easier to read Flannery O'Connor" and notes that while O'Connor's work never resembled that of Joyce or Faulkner in terms of its difficulty, she did share with these writers a reputation for producing thorny prose that resulted in critics whose "judgments and analyses...betrayed a groping around the peripheries of the fiction, a failure to come to grips with the quality of a mysterious reality that is at the heart of her best stories, and that seems to elude any easy specification."¹⁸³ Arguing that O'Connor "has yet to be adequately placed in the context of modern literary history,"¹⁸⁴ Orvell suggests in his review that

¹⁸⁰ A. L. Rowse, "Flannery O'Connor—Genius of the South," *Books and Bookmen* 17 (May 1972), 38-39, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 425.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 426.

¹⁸² "Paradox of the Peacock," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 25, 1972, 213, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 423.

¹⁸³ Miles D. Orvell, "Flannery O'Connor," *Sewanee Review* 78 (1970), 184-197, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 400.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 403.

too many critics have offered *faux* criticism because they are unable to address the mysteries of O'Connor's content. In his review for the journal *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, Frederick Asals complained that even O'Connor herself was not the best or only means of evaluating her work: "It has become depressingly commonplace to use her own words to account for her fiction, to assume that she is not only the creator of her works, but the final authority on them as well."¹⁸⁵ Such a remark recalls the previous discussion of reviewers regarding *Mystery and Manners* as a key to O'Connor's fiction. Asals, however, goes one step further, arguing that O'Connor herself was like her very first critics:

Flannery O'Connor is the first of the defenders of her work—the followers have been legion—who seem to feel that its wilderness needs explaining away, or at least tidying up, as an "inessential" feature attributable to an unsympathetic audience rather than to the exigencies of her own imagination.¹⁸⁶

What O'Connor's work "meant"—and the complementary meaning of her reputation—was now a subject deemed important enough to be worthy of debate.¹⁸⁷ In this light, one can see that O'Connor had "arrived."

Furthermore, critics were now contextualizing O'Connor and (as John Rodden has demonstrated with the case of Orwell) vying to "claim" her to support their own political ideas. One notable example of this phenomenon occurs in John Leonard's *New York Times* review. Leonard, a left-leaning critic known for his acerbity and integration of politics and art, mocked the notion of O'Connor as an author whom only orthodox Christians could appreciate:

¹⁸⁵ Frederick Asals, "Flannery Row," *Novel* 4 (Fall, 1970), 92-96, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 413.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁸⁷ Her themes were now also deemed worthy of academic attention: in 1966, Melvin J. Friedman and Jack A. Lawson edited for Fordham University Press *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*, a collection of ten explicatory essays; in 1969, Vanderbilt University Press published Carter W. Martin's *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*.

Flannery O'Connor fought all her life against the categorizers who would lock her inside a "gothic" or "grotesque" or "degenerate" box. We shouldn't allow her to be expropriated now by autocrats of the orthodox, the people who wear Christ like a campaign button to every symposium on Moral Fatigue—even when she herself conspires at that expropriation, as she sometimes does in this posthumous collection of essays and lectures. Southern Christians no more monopolize "mystery" than urban Jews monopolize self-hatred or blacks monopolize rage, or Hollywood monopolizes trash.¹⁸⁸

In the previous examinations of *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, we have seen that the truths about O'Connor regarded today as self-evident were not always present or part of her reputation. Jane Mushabac made a similar argument in her review of *Mystery and Manners* for the *Village Voice*: "It is difficult to imagine now, when we have become such gluttons for horror in our fiction, that critics and the public were once irked by all the poverty and violence in Flannery O'Connor's fiction."¹⁸⁹ Like Leonard, Mushabac attacked the idea that O'Connor is only for the faithful and that any objection to the freaks in her work is like "a quaint problem from another era."¹⁹⁰ More than ever, O'Connor reflected the America in which she was being read and sold: O'Connor's essays in *Mystery and Manners* "speak cogently and profoundly to our times, to the values—or lack thereof—of our current literary marketplace."¹⁹¹ As John Rodden has stated and shown, there is "a synchronic dimension to reputation,"¹⁹² a dimension reflected in the change in O'Connor's level of critical notice, acceptance, and debate from *Wise Blood* to *Mystery and Manners*.

¹⁸⁸ John Leonard, "Books of the Times: The Mystery of Evil and the Ultimate Concern," *New York Times*, May 13, 1969, 45.

¹⁸⁹ Jane Mushabac, review of *Mystery and Manners*, *Village Voice*, July 3, 1969, 7.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Rodden, 97.

Finally, on a lighter note, the response to *Mystery and Manners* continued and strengthened the connection between O'Connor and her favorite fowl, a connection also fostered by the collection's cover design (Fig. 19). In the *Chicago Tribune*, Charles Thomas Samuels drew the comparison: like the peacock, he argued, O'Connor was "partly deformed and partly splendid, symbol of the creator's mingled ludicrousness and glitter."¹⁹³ Presumably because of

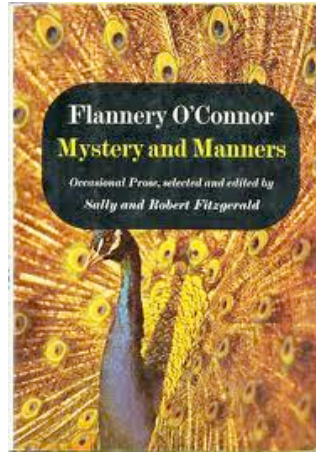


Figure 19

its strangeness, the peacock was described by other reviewers as a "hellish and heavenly"¹⁹⁴ creature and "a bird possibly only Flannery O'Connor could love."¹⁹⁵ A writer for the *Times Literary Supplement* stated that the peacock now seemed "a living allegory of her fiction,"¹⁹⁶ while a critic for *Catholic World* went as far as one could presumably go in terms of making a comparison: "As the peacock stands on a busy road and spreads his tail in disdain of an oncoming truck, so Miss O'Connor scoffs at contemporary philosophies of amorality, anti-

¹⁹³ Charles Thomas Samuels, "Flannery O'Connor: From Theology to Fable," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 1969, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 351.

¹⁹⁴ W. M. Kirkland, "Flannery O'Connor's Last Essays," 391.

¹⁹⁵ John Raymond, "Flannery O'Connor: She Wrote Because She Was Good at It," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, May 11, 1969, D10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 355.

¹⁹⁶ "Paradox of the Peacock," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 25, 1972, 213, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 422.

mystical approaches to reality, or disbelief in the Devil's existence."¹⁹⁷ The peacock had become an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible talent, a talent that critics and reviewers now almost universally viewed as being present since 1952 and which even death could not stop from growing exponentially.

¹⁹⁷ Charles J. Huelsbeck, "Of Fiction, Integrity, and Peacocks," *Catholic World* 210 (December 1969), 128-29, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 399.

CHAPTER 4

Robert Giroux, Sally Fitzgerald, and *The Habit of Being*

A Good Man Found: Robert Giroux and *The Complete Stories*

In the Winter, 1970 issue of *Studies in Short Fiction*, Landon C. Burns, a professor of English at Pennsylvania State University, presented “A Cross-Referenced Index of Short Fiction and Author-Title Listing,” an exhaustive index of over two hundred different short-story anthologies in print at the time. While some of the anthologies were for specialized markets (such as Hill and Wang’s *American Negro Short Stories*) and the oldest of them was first published in 1933, almost all of the other anthologies examined were published in the 1950s and 1960s and bore generic names such as Harper & Row’s *The World of Short Fiction* or Bantam’s *Fifty Great Short Stories*. Burns’s index became somewhat of an English professor’s industry standard: he offered numerous supplements, from the second in 1976 to the twentieth in 1993. His work is interesting and illuminating in gauging a short-story writer’s penetration of the mid-century anthology market that could prove the reach of an author’s reputation and value of his or her name, and his index reflects the degree to which O’Connor’s work was being assigned to undergraduates in the decade after her death. While readers today might agree with R. Neil Scott of the Georgia College Library that O’Connor’s stories are “represented in virtually every introductory literature anthology used in American universities,”¹ such was not always the case and Burns’s index allows us to see the rising of O’Connor’s star.

A statistical analysis of Burns’s index reveals that European (and one Russian) short-story writers dominated the anthology market and best appealed to what editors and professors

¹ R. Neil Scott, “Flannery O’Connor, a Brief Biographical Sketch,” in *Flannery O’Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism* (Milledgeville, GA: Timberlane Books, 2002), xix.

understood to be the needs of students in literature courses. O'Connor was represented in 29% of the anthologies, just behind Poe (31%) and—perhaps surprisingly—ahead of Hawthorne (24%).² Her most widely-anthologized story was “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” appearing in five times as many anthologies as “The Displaced Person,” which, as we have seen, many reviewers had hailed in 1952 as O'Connor's masterpiece.³ Clearly, editors and anthologists found the story of the Misfit to be most representative of O'Connor's art. However, while O'Connor had joined the ranks of the widely-anthologized, readers in 1970 still had no complete edition of her short stories, from her earliest works completed for her MFA at the University of Iowa to those she had hidden in her hospital bed.⁴ O'Connor needed an editorial champion, and she found, to the lasting benefit of her art and reputation, Robert Giroux. From his first editorial encounter with her in 1954 and throughout her career—indeed for many years long after her death—he helped transform her literary identity throughout the English-speaking world from that of “interesting regional writer” to a major figure in American literature.

In his 2008 *New York Times* obituary of Giroux, Christopher Lehman-Haupt described the editor as a behind-the-scenes advocate of literary excellence whose work complemented that of his senior partner: “If the flamboyant Roger Straus presented the public face of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, presiding over the business end, Mr. Giroux made his mark on the inside, as editor in chief, shaping the house's book list and establishing himself as the gold standard of literary

² Joyce topped the list of all indexed authors by appearing in 59% of the anthologies, followed by Lawrence and Chekhov, each appearing in 54%. The leading American authors were Faulkner and James (both at 52%), followed by Hemingway (44%), Porter (41%), Welty (38%) Anderson (37%), and Crane (36%). See Landon C. Burns, “A Cross-Referenced Index of Short Fiction and Author-Title Listing,” *Studies in Short Fiction* 7: 1 (Winter 1970), 6.

³ “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” appeared in fifteen anthologies; “The Displaced Person” appeared in three.

⁴ See Gooch, 373.

taste.”⁵ Speaking in 1981, Bernard Malamud expressed a similar idea: “If Robert Giroux represents good taste, Roger Straus knows what to do with it.”⁶ Two of the accomplishments of which Giroux was most proud were his having brought O’Connor (and *Wise Blood*) to Harcourt, Brace & Company when he worked there as an editor and eventually bringing her full catalogue to the firm that bore his name. An author’s editor, Giroux guided to publication all of O’Connor’s work from 1960 onward and capped his efforts with the 1971 publication of O’Connor’s *The Complete Stories*, a critical and financial success which, as we shall see, confirmed O’Connor as a writer with regional settings but universal themes. The result of Giroux’s influence can be seen today in O’Connor’s canonical status, one example of which was her inclusion in the Library of America in 1988. The reach of O’Connor’s reputation and its distinguishing features were developed and fashioned over time, in great part as a result of Giroux’s efforts both in public and behind the scenes.

Giroux was highly respected by his colleagues and the authors with whom he worked, and a brief look at his editorial style and assumptions can help one better appreciate how and why he became O’Connor’s publisher and advocate. He was renowned for his devotion to literature, a devotion sparked in the classroom of Mark Van Doren and in the pages of the *Columbia Review*, where he and the poet John Berryman published the first work of Thomas Merton.⁷ According to Isaac Bashevis Singer, Giroux was a man “never misled by politics, by the list of cheap bestsellers, or by the futile machinations of the word-jugglers,”⁸ an aspect of his

⁵ Christopher Lehman-Haupt, “Roger Giroux, Editor, Publisher and Nurturer of Literary Giants, Is Dead,” *New York Times*, September 6, 2008, B6.

⁶ *PEN American Newsletter* 47 (September 1981), 3. The newsletter item concerned Giroux and Roger Straus being awarded the fifth annual PEN Publisher Citation on April 8, 1981.

⁷ Donald Hall, “Robert Giroux: Looking for Masterpieces,” *New York Times*, January 6, 1980, BR1.

⁸ *PEN American Newsletter* 47 (September 1981), 3.

reputation articulated by Caroline Gordon, who, upon the publication of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, wrote to Giroux:

It must be a satisfaction to be able to serve the cause of good letters and, at the same time, promote a kind of theological understanding which has been woefully absent from contemporary literature—until recently. I am astonished when have time to pause and reflect on some of the changes that have come about since I began writing professionally. You have certainly had your share in bringing them about. Publishing Flannery’s stories must have been a real joy.⁹

Long before the 1971 publication of *The Complete Stories* and the introduction he composed for the volume, Giroux was building O’Connor’s reputation and affecting the larger literary scene. Unlike some of his editorial contemporaries, Giroux felt an almost vocational sense of duty toward the cause of promoting literature: as he stated in 1972, the publisher had to promote sales but also had “another obligation, and that is to keep the middling book in print, or bring new ones out. Because if he doesn’t the source of writing and of literature is going to dry up.”¹⁰ That a publisher with such an attitude found an author with no pretensions for market dominance or for her books rivaling the sales of *Love Story* or *The Godfather* is one of the happiest events in the story of O’Connor’s reputation.

In what might be the highest praise that can lavished upon an editor, Giroux was viewed by more than one author as “the professional heir to Maxwell Perkins.”¹¹ Giroux’s standard procedure when dealing with writers was to get out of their way—a simple-sounding and Perkinsesque practice that other editors sometimes found difficult. Susan Sontag noted that

⁹ Caroline Gordon to Giroux, 12 September, 1964. Unless otherwise noted, all correspondence quoted in this chapter is located in the Farrar, Straus & Giroux archives at the New York Public Library.

¹⁰ Henry Raymont, “Book Publishers See Better Times: But They Differ on Impact of Growth on Authors and Quality of Fiction,” *New York Times*, April 10, 1972, 1.

¹¹ *PEN American Newsletter* 47 (September 1981), 4. The quotation was said by Paul Horgan at the awards ceremony. In his 1980 *New York Times* portrait of Giroux, referenced above, the American poet Donald Hall made the same comparison: “He is the only living editor whose name is bracketed with that of Maxwell Perkins.”

Giroux and his house perfected “the civilized art of non-interference.”¹² Like Perkins, Giroux knew his writers’ habits and personalities well enough to know who needed prodding and who needed to be left undisturbed. Perkins’ advice to F. Scott Fitzgerald is an apt analogy to Giroux’s approach to his authors:

Don’t ever defer to my judgment. You won’t on any vital point, I know, and I should be ashamed if it were possible to have made you, for a writer of any account must speak solely for himself. I should hate to play...the W. D. Howells to your Mark Twain.¹³

Giroux was not an editor who advised O’Connor on how to best grapple with her thematic concerns or artistic performance—she had Caroline Gordon performing that role. Instead, Giroux was one who, like Perkins, worked tirelessly to support his authors emotionally and get their works in the hands of readers. As a result, and again reminiscent of Perkins, he felt as loyal to his authors as they did to him: Roger Straus noted, “Bob Giroux did not once suggest that authors follow him, but I remember counting that, over the first few years, seventeen authors made their way in our direction...This is a triumphant following that few editors have ever achieved or could achieve again.”¹⁴

An examination of Giroux’s correspondence reflects how seriously he took the responsibility of maintaining O’Connor’s reputation and keeping her in the public eye. In 1973, for example, a creator and distributor of educational materials contacted Giroux asking for permission to quote O’Connor in a filmstrip. Giroux wrote to O’Connor’s agent, Elizabeth McKee, “Although I dislike the whole approach, I have to admit that it might result in young

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Quoted in A. Scott Berg, *Maxwell Perkins: Editor of Genius* (New York: Berkley, 2008), 44-45.

¹⁴ *PEN American Newsletter* 47 (September 1981), 5.

people becoming interested in Flannery's work who would otherwise never hear of it."¹⁵ This is just one example of dozens of requests which Giroux could have easily denied but over which he paused to consider the ways in which they would affect the long-term growth of O'Connor's reputation. (He did grant permission in this instance.) Giroux responded to requests from high school and college students seeking information on O'Connor for their term papers, casual readers who wanted information on O'Connor for their local literary societies, book collectors who sought information about first editions, ordinary readers who spotted typographical errors, and even an Argentinean graduate student who asked if she could visit him when she came to New York to get a better sense of O'Connor's work.¹⁶ He also proved instrumental to David Farmer, whose *Flannery O'Connor: A Descriptive Bibliography* (1981) relied upon detailed information Giroux provided about when many of O'Connor's stories were first published, and in what order. In one of the more humorous letters Giroux received, a casual reader complained that the hardcover copies of *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear It Away*, and *Mystery and Manners* were out of print and had been "bought up by people who (understandably) will not yield up their copies for love or money"; the writer informed Giroux, "If you are not going to publish them again, we will each have to find an owner of an O'Connor book, get in his will, and wait for him to die."¹⁷ Giroux apologized for the books being out of print in hardcover and added,

¹⁵ Giroux to Elizabeth McKee, 7 March 1973.

¹⁶ A high-school junior from New Orleans wrote Giroux in 1973, described her term paper—due in six days—and stated, "I am looking for a book that she has written about what she feels about being a writer or writing in particular." Giroux responded that she should read *Mystery and Manners* (Jan Binder to Giroux, 13 October, 1973). Another student from what he described as "the small town (pop 2000) of Tunnel Hill, Georgia" wrote on the eve of his senior term paper to ask Giroux six questions about O'Connor, all of which he answered in short phases penciled on the student's original letter: "How much of her work is biographical? None" (Gandi Vaughn to Giroux, 22 April, 1988). A member of the Kettering, Ohio Literary Club wrote to ask his advice about giving a talk on "O'Connor's heroines"; a book collector wrote to describe his copy of *Everything that Rises Must Converge* to see if it was a first edition; a couple interested in starting a foundation to raise money to cure lupus solicited his advice. The range and number of requests that Giroux fielded is impressive; the Farrar, Straus & Giroux Archives at the New York Public Library house these and many similar requests.

“I’m not surprised to learn that they are rarities in the used-copy market; she’s the kind of writer readers don’t give up on.”¹⁸ Neither did Giroux, as is demonstrated by his efforts in making *The Complete Stories* a reality and bringing it before a worldwide readership.

On August 3, 1964, Giroux received a telegram from O’Connor’s mother bearing the news of Flannery’s death. Giroux wrote to her four days later to offer his condolences and suggest that moving forward with their plans to publish *Everything That Rises Must Converge* would be a testament to her daughter’s life and work: “Perhaps the greatest memorial we, as publishers, can pay her memory is the publication of her stories which as you know has been in progress since the spring. We would like to go ahead with this.”¹⁹ Giroux added that the collection would feature “perhaps a special preface by Robert Fitzgerald if he would be willing to do it” and closed with an offer of assistance and the statement, “It is an honor to be her publisher, but I also considered myself her friend and yours.” Regina’s blessing in all matters of her daughter’s publication was a requirement—one that, we will see, was even more of a factor in the late 1970s as Giroux and Sally Fitzgerald worked on securing copies of O’Connor’s letters for *The Habit of Being*. Robert Fitzgerald may have been the literary executor of all unpublished work, but Regina’s position as executor of the estate and mother of the artist had to be acknowledged. Giroux first wrote officially to propose *The Complete Stories* to Robert Fitzgerald in 1966, a year after the publication of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, arguing “there are many good reasons for doing this book” and noting how its publication would further O’Connor’s reputation:

¹⁷ Gary B. Brockman to Giroux, 19 November, 1973.

¹⁸ Giroux to Gary B. Brockman, 27 November, 1973.

¹⁹ Giroux to Regina O’Connor, 7 August, 1964.

Though some of the stories are not at her top level, they are still good and should be available as part of her total body of work...One of my lesser reasons for advocating the project is to give Flannery another chance at the National Book Award...Chiefly I think of the book as a document and as a tribute to Flannery's singular contribution to the art of the short story.²⁰

Giroux thus imagined *The Complete Stories* as much of a statement or artifact testifying to O'Connor's talent as much as a book to be read and enjoyed. The very existence of the collection would, Giroux imagined, be another leap forward for O'Connor's reputation.

The Complete Stories, however, would not be published until 1971, seven years after the author's death. Part of the delay involved some wrangling over reprint permissions for the stories O'Connor wrote as part of her MFA at the University of Iowa. There was some interest among rival publishers in the years following O'Connor's death to publish selections from O'Connor's thesis, *The Geranium*; Giroux wrote to Regina to express his disapproval of any such publications because he felt they would detract from the impact of *The Complete Stories*.²¹ In 1970, The Windhover Press, which operated out of the University of Iowa, wanted to publish a limited edition of *The Geranium*, arguing to Giroux that it "would be appropriate if Iowa, which had a hand in shaping Miss O'Connor's talent, could have the privilege of publishing something of hers."²² Giroux again wrote to Regina expressing his disapproval of a rival edition; he also wrote to Robert Fitzgerald, O'Connor's literary executor, asking him to deny Windhover's request (which he did) and to grant his permission to publish the contents of *The Geranium* as part of *The Complete Stories*. Giroux also worked with Elizabeth McKee, O'Connor's agent and representative of the estate, to secure the rights from Harcourt, Brace for the stories originally collected in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. He feared that Harcourt, Brace

²⁰ Giroux to Robert Fitzgerald, 29 December, 1966.

²¹ Giroux to Regina O'Connor, 16 September, 1966.

²² K. K. Merker to Robert Giroux, 12 June, 1970.

would not “give in easily”²³ and had similar fears regarding Robert Fitzgerald, who was concerned that the stories in *The Geranium* were less than O’Connor’s best.²⁴ Both of these fears, however, proved premature: Harcourt, Brace gave its permission and Fitzgerald gave his, allowing Giroux to move ahead with his project and write to Elizabeth McKee, “I believe I’ve finally got Robert Fitzgerald housebroken as far as copyright goes.”²⁵ Giroux’s negotiation of both legal and social networks was all done with the goal of increasing O’Connor’s readership and cementing her reputation in a way that he felt only a complete edition of her stories could do.

One request that Fitzgerald denied, however, was to compose an introduction to the proposed volume. In a letter to Giroux, he explained that he had said all he had to say about O’Connor in his introduction to *Everything that Rises Must Converge*: “I couldn’t add anything substantial to what I wrote for *Everything*,” he stated, “or write anything better.”²⁶ Rather than turn to another of O’Connor’s friends or fellow-authors, Giroux decided to write the introduction himself. That he sent drafts of it to Regina, Elizabeth McKee, and the Fitzgeralds reflects his determination to portray their common friend in a way true to her character and in a way that would enhance her status among readers, both those coming to her work for the first time and those revisiting the roads traveled by the Misfit and Manley Pointer. Like Robert Fitzgerald in his introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Giroux presented himself as an insider whose opinions on O’Connor’s art and character deserved notice. Also like Fitzgerald’s, Giroux’s introduction gave many critics their cues on how to respond to the volume they were asked to review.

²³ Giroux to Elizabeth McKee, 29 December, 1966.

²⁴ Robert Fitzgerald to Elizabeth McKee, 14 August, 1967.

²⁵ Giroux to Elizabeth McKee, 14 September, 1967.

²⁶ Robert Fitzgerald to Giroux, 20 September, 1969.

If the story of the backwards-walking chicken is the most often-told biographical anecdote concerning O'Connor, the story of her first meeting Paul Engle at the Iowa Writer's Workshop runs a close second. The anecdote, which first appeared in Giroux's introduction to *The Complete Stories*, is a test case of how a single incident can be retold and reshaped to suit the teller's aims in the short term and affect the subject's reputation in the long one. In July, 1971, the year of *The Complete Stories*' publication, Paul Engle wrote to Robert Giroux in response to Giroux's questions about Engle's first meeting O'Connor when he was Director of the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Noting the difficulty of describing O'Connor "in any way worthy of her,"²⁷ Engle told of their first meeting, when she entered his office and spoke in a Georgian accent so thick that it sounded like "a secret language" to which Engle was unable to respond:

I asked her to repeat. No comprehension again. A third time. No communication. Embarrassed, suspicious, I asked her to write down what she had just said on a pad. She wrote, "My name is Flannery O'Connor. I am not a journalist. Can I come to the Writer's Workshop?"

Engle then explained how he and O'Connor came to enjoy a "strange and yet trusting relationship" and how she impressed him with both her stories and work ethic. His letter fosters the image of O'Connor as (in his words) "imaginative, tough, alive" but also, as he describes her stories, "quietly filled with insight." Engle mentioned that O'Connor preferred to have him read her work aloud during workshops to guard her anonymity; he also told of a time he realized that the reason a scene she had written featuring a young man and woman about to make love rang false was because O'Connor was "improvising from innocence." Although O'Connor was uncomfortable with asking Engle's advice on how to make the scene more believable—and did so in the privacy of Engle's car "with the windows rolled up"—she withstood any social unease for the sake of her art: "She was uncomfortable, but the wish to have it right dominated."

²⁷ Paul Engle to Giroux, 13 July, 1971. All subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from this letter.

Differing from “the exuberant talkers who serenade every writing class with their loudness,” O’Connor is portrayed in Engle’s letter as a meditative and awkward young woman whose work was unlike anything Engle had yet encountered while at Iowa.

Giroux begins his introduction with the story of this meeting, a story that he knew from Engle’s letter and from which he quotes extensively. After retelling the scene in which O’Connor wrote her request on a pad, Giroux quotes Engle’s initial assessment:

At their first meeting in his office in 1946, Mr. Engle recalls, he was unable to understand a word of Flannery’s native Georgian tongue... “I told her to bring examples of her writing and we would consider her, late as it was. Like Keats, who spoke Cockney but wrote the purest sounds in English, Flannery spoke a dialect beyond instant comprehension but on the page her prose was imaginative, tough, alive: just like Flannery herself. The will to be a writer was adamant; nothing could resist it, not even her own sensibility about her own work.”²⁸

This is not, however, exactly as the seventy-five year-old Engle retold the story in 1983 to a reporter for the *Washington Post*, who wrote a long profile of Engle’s time at the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. In this version, O’Connor’s Southern roots are heightened (some might say caricatured) and Engle presents a decidedly less polished figure:

She came out of the red dirt country of Georgia. She walked into my office one day and spoke to me. I understood nothing, not one syllable. As far as I knew, she was saying, “Aaaaraaaaaarah.” My God, I thought to myself, this is a retarded young girl. Then I looked at her eyes. They were crossed! Finally, I said, excuse me, my name is Paul Engle. I gave her a pad—believe me, this is true—and said would you please write down what you’re telling me. And she wrote, “My name is Flannery O’Connor. I’m from Milledgeville, Georgia. I’m a writer.” She didn’t say, “I want to be a writer.” She said, “I am a writer.” I said do you have any writing with you. She had one of the most beat-up handbags I’d ever seen. It must have been put in an old-fashioned water-powered washing machine and churned for a day. She handed me this paper. I read four lines. You don’t need to eat all of an egg to know if it’s good or bad. I looked at her and said to myself, “Christ, this is it. This is pure talent. What can I do? I can’t teach her anything!” I taught her a little. She had a few problems—with her society, her illness.²⁹

²⁸ Robert Giroux, introduction to O’Connor, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), vii.

Here, the addition of “I am a writer” makes O’Connor seem even more forceful and confident, despite her not having yet produced any substantial work; whether or not anyone’s talent can be appraised after only “four lines” is debatable. What is more interesting about the anecdote is that Giroux used it as a true account of O’Connor without, it seems, fully believing it, or at least not finding that it reflected his experience with her. In a 2007 interview, he stated that O’Connor’s accent “seemed to bother people in New York, but I never had any trouble understanding her. Never like Paul Engle. And you know, you’d think she spoke a foreign language or something. I thought she was very clear. I had no trouble with her.”³⁰ That Giroux did not express any of these sentiments in his introduction suggests that he, like so many reviewers of *The Complete Stories*, found the anecdote too perfect of a hook on which to hang his portrait of the artist as an outsider, waiting to be literally and figuratively understood. As the newspaper editor in John Ford’s *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* remarks, “When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

Reviewers of *The Complete Stories* and later biographers have found in this anecdote-legend a representative moment for their collective creation of O’Connor’s reputation: the determined, outside-the-norm young writer whose progress would not be hampered by the inability of those who, having ears, heard not. Soon, O’Connor would be (as she later remarked) shouting to the hard of hearing and, to the almost-blind, drawing her large and startling figures. Paul Elie notes that Giroux’s portrayal of O’Connor as “plainspoken, charming, shy and yet sure

²⁹ Colman McCarthy, “The Servant of Literature In the Heart of Iowa: Paul Engle’s Years of Bringing People Who Write to a Place Where People Farm,” *Washington Post*, March 27, 1983, G1.

³⁰ Frances Florencourt, interview of Robert Giroux, January 24, 2007, in *At Home with Flannery O’Connor: An Oral History*, ed. by Bruce Gentry and Craig Amason (Milledgeville, GA: The Flannery O’Connor-Andalusia Foundation, Inc., 2012), 84.

of herself, and with good reason”³¹ was one that resonated with many readers of *The Complete Stories*, as it seemed to suit the strange young woman whose fiction would explore spiritual themes without any ambiguity or hesitation. In his biography, Brad Gooch refashions the scene to enhance *his* overall portrayal of O’Connor as socially awkward (and perhaps to soften some of Engle’s rough edges as seen in his 1983 retelling, which Gooch used as a source). In Gooch’s version, O’Connor enters Engle’s office after a “gentle knock” on his door (what Engle in his letter to Giroux called a “shy knock”) and becomes the focus of a scene that reinforces her reputation as an outsider:

After he shouted an invitation to enter, a shy young woman appeared and walked over to his desk without, at first, saying a word. He could not even tell, as she stood before him, whether she was looking in his direction, or out the window at the curling Iowa River below. A hulking six foot four inch poet, in his thirties, with wavy dark hair, alert blue eyes, and expressive eyebrows, Engle quickly took the lead. He introduced himself and offered her a seat, as she tightly held onto what he later described as “one of the most beat-up handbags I’ve ever seen.”³²

Gooch emphasizes Engle’s “hulking” physical features as a means of characterizing O’Connor as unafraid and determined to follow her vocation; Engle’s original description of O’Connor as “cross-eyed” is changed to her gazing at an indeterminate spot, perhaps to portray her as less hayseed than philosopher. Whether or not the scene played out exactly as Engle, Giroux, or Gooch present is ultimately unknowable. But if the scene is not wholly accurate in fact, it is in the spirit of the reputation that Giroux works to fashion in his introduction: that of O’Connor as almost a visitor from that strange country “where silence is never broken except to shout the truth.”³³ Giroux took his cue from Engle and, as a survey of the critical reaction to *The Complete Stories* will reveal, subsequent reviewers and readers took theirs from Giroux. As with

³¹ Elie, 145.

³² Gooch, 117.

³³ O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 242.

the backward-walking chicken, the iconic peacock, or the four repeatedly-quoted maxims from *Mystery and Manners*, the temptation to not use this anecdote as somehow ultimately reflective of O'Connor's character and art proved too strong for later critics and readers to resist. Giroux's own artistic decision here of how to portray O'Connor in his introduction thus became a permanent part of O'Connor's reputation.

Many modern readers, with the assistance of decades' worth of critical and biographical material written about O'Connor, are accustomed to thinking of her as relentless in the development of her art and unwilling to suffer fools as she did so. However, these readers should keep in mind that, at the time of *The Complete Stories*, there were no biographies but only appreciations such as those collected in *Esprit*. Giroux's introduction, like Robert Fitzgerald's, characterized O'Connor as undeterred by those who could not figuratively understand her; it was another tile in what was becoming the "total mosaic" of the artist. Giroux states that when he first met O'Connor, he "sensed a tremendous strength" and recognized her as "the rarest kind of young writer, one who was prepared to work her utmost and knew exactly what she must do with her talent."³⁴ He then proves his own assertions with the evidence of O'Connor's correspondence with John Selby, her first editor at Rinehart, who disapproved of the shape that *Wise Blood* was taking. Giroux quotes O'Connor's then-unpublished letter to her agent, Elizabeth McKee, in which she complains that Selby feared leaving the novel to her "fiendish care" and that he spoke to her in a tone appropriate to "a slightly dimwitted Campfire Girl."³⁵ Selby is cast by Giroux as a self-satisfied *littérateur* who could not recognize the obvious excellence of *Wise Blood*; Paul Elie has it exactly right when he speaks of Giroux "casually

³⁴ Giroux, viii.

³⁵ Ibid., x.

assuming her greatness”³⁶ as he writes of O’Connor’s feud with Selby. This part of the introduction concludes with O’Connor and Giroux’s standing as Godparents to the Fitzgeralds’ daughter, O’Connor’s being released from Selby’s philistine grasp, and Giroux’s acquiring her and *Wise Blood* for his firm. Readers are invited to see, with the benefit of hindsight, O’Connor as Giroux states he did at their first meeting and to congratulate themselves for doing so.

Like Fitzgerald, Giroux uses the initial reception of *Wise Blood* to suggest O’Connor’s literary peculiarity and initial friction with the critical community. Stating, “I was disappointed with the reviews more than she was; they all recognized her power but missed her point,”³⁷ Giroux recalls Fitzgerald’s assertion in his introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge* that, “The reviewers, by and large, didn’t know what to make of it.”³⁸ But Giroux again invites readers to congratulate themselves for *not* “missing her point,” noting, “We reissued *Wise Blood* in 1962, on the tenth anniversary of the original publication, and it lives on in both cloth and paperback editions. Didn’t some wise man define a classic as a book that does not stay out of print?”³⁹ Wise men knew what others did not: O’Connor was worth courting as an editor and her work was worth the cost to her readers. The fact that they were holding *The Complete Stories* was further proof of their sophistication. Such an assumption would have been unimaginable with a copy of *Wise Blood* nineteen years earlier.

The “wise man” mentioned by Giroux was Mark Van Doren⁴⁰—but the wise man on whom the remainder of Giroux’s introduction relies for making its argument about O’Connor’s

³⁶ Elie, 432.

³⁷ Giroux, xii.

³⁸ Ibid., xviii.

³⁹ Ibid., xiii.

⁴⁰ Robert Giroux, “Thomas Merton’s Durable Mountain,” *New York Times*, October 11, 1998.

greatness is Thomas Merton. Giroux describes O'Connor and Merton's mutual admiration: Merton gave Giroux a copy of *A Meditation* to give to O'Connor and she was very interested in the Abbey of Gesthsemani in Kentucky where Merton lived. Giroux compares O'Connor to Merton in several important ways: both died (in the by-now familiar phrase in appreciations of O'Connor) "at the height of their powers," both Catholics possessed "deep faith," and both were "as American as one can be."⁴¹ Few moments in O'Connor's reputation history are as clearly marked as this: all of the previous critical commentary about her universality seemingly worked towards this moment, where Flannery O'Connor became an American—rather than merely Southern—author. Not once does Giroux mention Caldwell, McCullers, or Faulkner: O'Connor had achieved escape velocity from the South that once seemed to contain and, in some readers' opinions, restrict her art. To Giroux, O'Connor's work "can only be understood in an American setting,"⁴² an important distinction and one that shows the increasingly-widening lens through which O'Connor's fiction was being viewed. Such a lens demanded a comprehensive and definitive version of her stories, which Giroux argues were best arranged (unlike her two previous collections) in chronological order. Giroux observes that such an arrangement does not imply "that all the stories here are of equal merit" but notes, "It simply seems desirable to preserve as complete a collection of Flannery O'Connor's short fiction as possible."⁴³ This desire to publish and preserve a definitive edition of O'Connor's work—from the stories that comprised her master's thesis to "Judgment Day," a reworking of her very first story—was one that Giroux felt himself able to fulfill and for which, we shall see, the critical community and

⁴¹ Giroux, introduction to *The Complete Stories*, xiii.

⁴² *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

general readers were grateful: the collection has, like all of O'Connor's other work, remained in print and is currently in its sixty-fourth printing.

The critical community took Giroux at his word and responded to *The Complete Stories* with all of the enthusiasm that Giroux, as both friend of the author and partner in the firm publishing her works, could desire. The response to his "fascinating-to-all-O'Connor-fans"⁴⁴ introduction reveals the degree to which his words were seen as holy writ in terms of how readers should approach O'Connor's fiction. While some critics complimented Giroux by calling his introduction simply "charming,"⁴⁵ "discreet,"⁴⁶ or "useful,"⁴⁷ others praised it as "illuminating,"⁴⁸ particularly, in the words of Robert Drake in *Modern Age*, as "perceptive and sympathetic" because Giroux offered a glimpse of O'Connor's "fortitude and integrity" and "does not do Miss O'Connor the disservice of indiscriminately praising all the stories."⁴⁹ Such a disservice was seen in other reviews, most notably Martha Duffy's in *Time*, in which she seemed eager to atone for her magazine's past dismissals of O'Connor's art:

This collection brings together for the first time in one book all of Miss O'Connor's stories. Every one is good enough so that if it were the only example of her work to survive, it would be evident that the writer possessed high talent and a remarkably unclouded, un-abstract, demanding intelligence.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Joel Wells, "A Genius Who Frustrated Critics," *National Catholic Reporter*, November 19, 1971, 16, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 435.

⁴⁵ J. J. Quinn, review of *The Complete Stories*, by Flannery O'Connor, *America* 125 (December 11, 1971), 519, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 442.

⁴⁶ Melvin J. Friedman, "Flannery O'Connor: The Canon Completed, the Commentary Continuing," *Southern Literary Journal* 5 (Spring 1973), 116-23, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 457.

⁴⁷ George Core, "Unflinching Honesty, Rare Perception—That's O'Connor," Nashville *Tennessean*, February 27, 1972, C10, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 449.

⁴⁸ Jim Vollmar, "Flannery O'Connor: An Authentic Voice of the American South," *The Month* 24 (September-October, 1991), 443-47, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 472.

⁴⁹ Robert Drake, "Her Sacred Office," *Modern Age* 16:3 (Summer, 1972), 322-24, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 452.

⁵⁰ Martha Duffy, "At Gunpoint," *Time*, November 21, 1971, 88.

To Drake and like-minded reviewers, an absence of this kind of blanket praise made Giroux all the more sincere and his portrait of O'Connor all the more truthful.

Other reviewers praised Giroux's chronological assemblage of the stories while also noting the peculiar effects of such an arrangement. Writing in the *Southern Literary Journal*, Melvin J. Friedman noted that "rearranging the stories might be likened by some critics to the heresy of reordering Joyce's *Dubliners* or Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*" but also acknowledged that a chronological arrangement "lets us in on the subtle and gradual maturing of a remarkable talent."⁵¹ In the *Southern Review*, Frederick P. W. McDowell noted that Giroux's arrangement "allows us to see her cumulative development as an artist" and "trace the deepening and maturity of her creativity."⁵² Paul Elie, however, argues that the ordering "undid the careful selection and discrimination that O'Connor had brought to her short fiction," since it suggested that her master's thesis and early versions of chapters of her novels were equally as important as her masterpieces: "'A Good Man Is Hard to Find' was sandwiched between 'Enoch and the Gorilla' and 'A Late Encounter with the Enemy,' between an excerpt and a trifle."⁵³ But Elie's objection is the exception to the general rule of critics' appreciating Giroux's instinct as an editor and insight as a reader.

As mentioned earlier, the first reviewers of *The Complete Stories* latched onto the anecdote about O'Connor's first meeting with Paul Engle and used it as a way that continued to foster the impression of O'Connor as an outsider in terms of geography and thematic concerns. After retelling the story of that meeting and Engle's difficulty in understanding his future

⁵¹ Friedman, "Flannery O'Connor: The Canon Completed, the Commentary Continuing," 458.

⁵² Frederick P. W. McDowell, "Toward the Luminous and the Numinous: The Art of Flannery O'Connor," *Southern Review* (New Series) 9:4 (1973), 998-1013, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 458, 463.

⁵³ Elie, 432.

student, Joel Wells, in the *National Catholic Reporter*, stated that O'Connor "proved to be one of those very, very few who live up to and surpassed the promise-detectors' fondest dreams."⁵⁴ But the story of O'Connor's meeting with Engle (and her unintelligible accent) resonated in other ways, even when it was not explicitly mentioned. For example, writing in the *New York Times*, Thomas Lask praised the stories as "shining examples of what a good many critics look for: regional stories with universal truths."⁵⁵ O'Connor's Southern foundations were, once again, recognized as a means by which she could explore larger issues—ones even amenable to readers of the *New York Times*. Guy Davenport, writing in the *National Review*, used the anecdote of the accent as a way to emphasize O'Connor's roots and how, for Southern writers, the "grand rhythms and terse realities" of the Bible "turn up in their prose as naturally as a shrug rises in a Frenchman's shoulders," but he also drew from the anecdote the notion that O'Connor's "brilliant stories are some of the finest in modern literature" and have been "read too long as grotesqueries from the midden of the late Confederacy."⁵⁶ Some earlier critics unquestionably felt that O'Connor's characters all belonged to "the genus Southern Neanderthal"⁵⁷; now, critics such as Richard Freedman in the *Washington Post* argued that the Southern accent pervading O'Connor's work created "an unparalleled picture of the Deep South—at once horrifying and hilarious—as a metaphor for the human condition when the 20th century lurched past its halfway

⁵⁴ Wells, "A Genius Who Frustrated Critics," 435.

⁵⁵ Thomas Lask, "Death Never Takes a Holiday," *New York Times*, December 3, 1971, 37.

⁵⁶ Guy Davenport, "Even as the Heathen Rage," *National Review* 123 (December 31, 1971), 1473-74, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 444.

⁵⁷ Webster Schott, "Flannery O'Connor: Faith's Stepchild," *The Nation* 201 (September 13, 1965), 142-146, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 288.

mark.”⁵⁸ Freedman’s review contains what may be the most succinct recasting of O’Connor’s life and death to suit the critical consensus of her as an outsider:

As a Southerner she was cut off from the dominant American culture of the North. As a Catholic she was further cut off from the dominant Protestantism of the South. And as a sufferer for half of her life from the progressive arthritic disease of lupus, she became an invalid who, in 1964, was ultimately cut off from life itself.⁵⁹

As Freedman argues, O’Connor’s three-part outsider status “allowed her to see life around her with ultimate objectivity.”⁶⁰

One way of gauging the degree to which an author’s reputation has taken root in the consciousnesses of readers is the frequency by which a “typical” character or pattern for that author is spoken of as if its elements were common knowledge. Such is the case when one describes a regime as Orwellian or a bureaucracy as Kafkaesque. While “O’Connoresque” may not be part of the lexicon outside of English departments, the critical response to *The Complete Stories* reflects a growing assumption that there was such a thing as a “typical O’Connor situation” or a person that could be described as a “typical O’Connor type.” As Chesterton once noted that the force and reach of Dickens’ reputation was seen in the fact that people could casually refer to someone as “a perfect Pecksniff,” an examination of O’Connor’s critics reveals the growing sense that the combination of her thematic concerns and artistic performance had created something unique that would forever become part of her reputation and American literary history. This idea first gained currency in reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*: critics spoke of “recurrent types,” such as “the self-righteous who consider

⁵⁸ Richard Freedman, “The Pride of the Peacock is the Glory of God,” *Washington Post*, January 30, 1972, 11, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 447.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 448.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

themselves saved by good deeds,”⁶¹ the person who finds him or herself “doing the right things for the wrong motives,”⁶² or, at bottom, “an anguished human being, trying to control the circle of his existence.”⁶³ Reviewers of *The Complete Stories* continued this trend of noting the O’Connor type as a means of praising the organic wholeness of her approach. For example, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Alfred Kazin stated, “People in her stories are always at the end of their strength. They are at the synapse between what they are (unknown to themselves) and what they do,”⁶⁴ while a critic for the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* later wrote, “Her trademark is the ostensibly good character who is not, you come to realize, really as nice as the villain of the same story.”⁶⁵ Others noted the ways in which these character types encounter similar ends. In his *Commentary* review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Warren Coffey stated that O’Connor’s “paradigm story” was “a kind of morality play in which Pride of Intellect (usually Irreligion) has a shattering encounter with the Corrupt Human Heart (the Criminal, the Insane, sometimes the sexually Demonic) and either sees the light or dies, sometimes both.”⁶⁶ Reviewing *The Complete Stories* in *Newsweek* six years later, Walter Clemons distilled O’Connor’s stories into a pattern that echoes the one detailed by Coffey:

An O’Connor story often begins with a confident figure on a front porch, armed with platitudes, facing down a suspicious-looking stranger. Before it’s over,

⁶¹ Edward M. Hood, “Rural Georgia and the Starry Universe,” *Shenandoah* 16 (Summer 1965), 109-114, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 284.

⁶² Richard A. Duprey, “New Books,” *Catholic World* 202 (October 1965), 54, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 299.

⁶³ James F. Farnham, “The Essential Flannery O’Connor,” *Cross Currents* 15 (Summer 1965), 376-378, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 282.

⁶⁴ Alfred Kazin, review of *The Complete Stories*, by Flannery O’Connor, *New York Times Book Review*, November 28, 1971, 1.

⁶⁵ Donovan Young, “3 New Books Cull Stories, Letters of Flannery O’Connor,” *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, April 8, 1984, H9, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 464.

⁶⁶ Warren Coffey, review of *The Complete Stories*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Commentary* 40:5 (November 1965), 97.

safety has been violated, pride is stolen, and the whole house of cards in which a spurious life has been conducted may be pulled down.⁶⁷

The front porch Clemons mentions could take a number of forms: the literal porch in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” or a figurative fortress of self-assurance, such as the tarpaper shack in “The Artificial Nigger,” Motes’s Essex in *Wise Blood*, or Rayber’s room at the Cherokee Lodge in *The Violent Bear It Away*.

These remarks about O’Connor’s typical characters and patterns recall the previous discussion of O’Connor’s initially perceived “limitations,” but with a marked change in attitude towards this supposed deficiency. Many reviewers of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* complained of O’Connor’s narrow range and repetitive plotting; such complaints resurfaced in some reviews of *The Complete Stories*, as when, for example, John Alfred Avant, in *Library Journal*, stated that O’Connor “reiterated the same themes with too little variety,”⁶⁸ or when John Idol, in a review for *Studies in Short Fiction*, stated that her tendency to shock her reader became repetitious to the point where the impact was lessened with each character’s death.⁶⁹ However, a survey of the reviews of *The Complete Stories* reveals that while O’Connor’s repetitiousness was still acknowledged, it was recast as an example of her persistence in examining a complex subject. Depth was beginning to triumph over breadth. For example, Richard Freedman noted that “Miss O’Connor had her obsessive themes and her special provenance, which becomes abundantly clear when her stories are read *in toto*. Yet, the fecundity of her imagination saved her from being merely repetitious, and each story has its peculiar ambience and personality.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Walter Clemons, “Acts of Grace,” *Newsweek*, November 8, 1971, 116-17, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 431.

⁶⁸ John Alfred Avant, review of *The Complete Stories*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Library Journal* 97 (January 1, 1972), 85, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 445.

⁶⁹ John Idol, review of *The Complete Stories*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Studies in Short Fiction* 10 (1973), 103-105, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 454.

Robert Drake described the collection as comprised of stories similar in form and content, but not resulting in any repetitiveness or loss of quality:

One cannot help but think James would have commended her for being so faithful to the writer's sacred office and that Hemingway would also have praised her accordingly—both of them, one remembers, extremely limited writers as well. Miss O'Connor, too, found—or was there found for her?—early in the day what for her was the one thing needful, what her one story was; and she served it well and faithfully all her days.⁷¹

This critical revision, this transformation of a supposed fault into an argument for her excellence, illuminates one way in which a writer's reputation can be revisited and revised as it is being formed. In a later review of the Faber & Faber imprint of *The Complete Stories* published in the United Kingdom, a critic for *New Statesman and Society* stated, "These deft parables have often been confused with a trick of telling the same story over and over again. Yet the reader is always arrested by the ferocious attention to detail, and O'Connor's forms are no more routine than cut diamonds."⁷² In his previously-cited review for *Newsweek*, Walter Clemons noted, "It takes some readers (I was one) a while to understand" that O'Connor's work is "more than a superb Punch-and-Judy show."⁷³ His tongue-in-cheek *mea culpa*, a confession of the sin of critical misjudgment, reflects the ways in which aspects of a reputation that seem obvious at one point can change with the publication of a new volume or the passing of time. As the watchwords we have previously examined showed their wear—and were still showing it, as when the *New*

⁷⁰ Freedman, "The Pride of the Peacock is the Glory of God," 447.

⁷¹ Drake, "Her Sacred Office," 452.

⁷² Chris Savage King, review of *Wise Blood*, in *New Statesmen and Society* 4 (February 8, 1991), 37-38, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 465.

⁷³ Clemons, "Acts of Grace," 431.

Statesmen noted that “the term ‘Southern Gothic’ doesn’t do her justice”⁷⁴—so did this past complaint. The old defect had become a new strength and a well-earned claim.

Giroux was grateful for the critical approval of *The Complete Stories* but was equally appreciative of the letters he received from his publisher colleagues and readers from across the country and overseas. William Jovanovich, who had become chairman of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1970, wrote a thank-you letter to Giroux, complimenting him on his work and adding, “This I shall enjoy indeed!”⁷⁵ Jovanovich was not unique in his desire to compliment Giroux for *The Complete Stories*: one reader wrote Giroux to thank him for “bringing Flannery O’Connor’s work to us all,”⁷⁶ while another wrote to inform him, “Miss O’Connor’s fiction always excites the hell out of me” and tell Giroux he deserved the highest praise for “the very handsome volume” he had “turned out.”⁷⁷ Denver Lindley, O’Connor’s final editor at Harcourt, Brace before she moved to Farrar, Straus and Giroux, wrote to tell Giroux, “How pleased she would have been by the jacket! And how vividly that jacket brings back her handsome pets”⁷⁸—another example of both “the imagined O’Connor” and her peacocks as reputation iconography. One of the more striking pieces of fan mail came from Hajime Noguchi, author of *Criticism of Flannery O’Connor*, the first book written about O’Connor in Japan: after thanking Giroux for his efforts, Noguchi added, “I was deeply impressed by your beautiful introduction.”⁷⁹ As usual,

⁷⁴ King, review of *Wise Blood*, 465.

⁷⁵ William Jovanovich to Giroux, 13 October, 1971.

⁷⁶ Mildred V. Carbrera to Giroux, 2 October, 1979.

⁷⁷ Michael Hefner to Giroux, 2 July, 1971.

⁷⁸ Denver Lindley to Giroux, 26 October, 1971.

⁷⁹ Hajime Noguchi to Giroux, 27 January, 1988.

Giroux personally responded to such letters with humility and grace, noting in one, “I consider it a tragedy that she died so relatively young, and at the height of her power.”⁸⁰

In addition to an outpouring of good will from a full spectrum of readers, *The Complete Stories* also received the 1972 National Book Award for fiction—the first time that the award was posthumously given. The history of O’Connor and the National Book Awards is one of near-misses and close encounters with writers who composed “safer” choices or works more mainstream than O’Connor’s examinations of literal grace under pressure.⁸¹ As Joel Wells noted, the unspoken rule seemed to be that O’Connor “simply couldn’t be assimilated into the fine gears of the literary establishment—no Pulitzer or National Book Award.”⁸² In 1972, however, *The Complete Stories* rose above nine other National Book Award finalists, including Updike’s *Rabbit Redux*, Joyce Carol Oates’s *Wonderland*, and *Love in the Ruins*, the second novel by fellow Southern Catholic Walker Percy. The conferring of a National Book Award is, of course, not necessarily fully indicative of a winning text’s literary quality; many other factors that contribute to the book’s cultural climate play a part, the degree to which can vary from year to year. However, the fact that a work is nominated at all suggests that it has been vetted, if not accepted, by the critical community, since the five judges selected by the National Book Foundation have always been, according to the National Book Foundation, “published writers

⁸⁰ Giroux to Michael Hefner, 4 November, 1971.

⁸¹ *Wise Blood* was, perhaps unsurprisingly, not nominated, but *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* was in 1956; it lost to John O’Hara’s *Ten North Frederick*, a novel about a decidedly un-Mr. Smith figure who goes to Washington. In 1961, *The Violent Bear It Away* was nominated, along with *Rabbit, Run*, *A Separate Peace* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but lost to Conrad Richter’s *The Waters of Kronos*. *Everything That Rises Must Converge* was nominated in 1966, but lost to *The Collected Stories of Katherine Anne Porter*.

⁸² Wells, “A Genius Who Frustrated Critics,” 435.

who are known to be doing great work in the genre or field, and in some cases, are past NBA Finalists or Winners.”⁸³

The 1972 National Book Awards were controversial and closely watched by readers and publishers for a number of reasons. The NBF had been working to rebuild some of its own reputation after a decade of insinuations that the Awards were merely “an elaborate marketing enterprise of the New York publishing establishment”⁸⁴ or, in the words of Anthony West (who served on the 1967 jury), “a farce in the realm of General Foods’ Salesman of the Year Awards, a matter of intramural stroking.”⁸⁵ The previous year’s jury, led by William Styron, threatened to resign if the bestseller *Love Story* was listed as a final nominee.⁸⁶ In 1972, the NBF introduced a new category, “Contemporary Affairs,” one nominee of which was *The Last Whole Earth Catalogue*—a title that prompted Garry Wills, one of the judges, to resign in protest over what he saw as a bending of the rules which allowed a work with an editor, rather than author, to be considered.⁸⁷ The Awards ceremony was also the site of what the *New York Times* described as “deep worry about the decline of the quality of life in the face of commercialism and technology.”⁸⁸ But in the midst of all of the critical hand-wringing and debates over the quality of the winners, the jury’s revising of the rules so that O’Connor could be given a posthumous Award was not met with any controversy; as *The Washington Post* noted, “Few were surprised at

⁸³ www.nationalbook.org/nba_process, accessed April 2, 2013.

⁸⁴ Joseph F. Trimmer, *The National Book Awards for Fiction: An Index to the First Twenty-Five Years* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978), xiv.

⁸⁵ Quoted in Trimmer, xvi.

⁸⁶ Trimmer, xvii.

⁸⁷ *The Last Whole Earth Catalogue* eventually won the Award: see “Judge Resigns in Dispute: ‘Whole Earth Catalogue’ Gets Award,” *Daytona Morning Beach Journal*, April 12, 1972, 10.

⁸⁸ Henry Raymont, “Notes of Concern Mark Book Awards Ceremony,” *New York Times*, April 14, 1972, 21.

the selection”⁸⁹ and, as reported in the *Savannah News-Press*, the decision to recognize *The Complete Stories* “aroused no dispute.”⁹⁰ This was not the first time that the rules had been bent for O’Connor: in 1966, the NBF explicitly prohibited judges from conferring “special awards or honorable mention,”⁹¹ but the fiction judges (Paul Horgan, Glenway Wescott, and J. F. Powers) flouted the rule by noting at the Awards ceremony the recent death of O’Connor and honored her as “a writer lost to American literature” whose work “commands our memory with sensations of life conveyed with an intensity of pity and participation, love, and redemption, rarely encountered.”⁹² Nor would it be the last, as we shall see in an examination of the National Book Critics Circle Award. Speaking as one of the five fiction judges in 1971, Joseph Heller called O’Connor “among the most distinguished American writers,” and added, “her *Complete Stories* contains her best fiction writing.”⁹³ That Heller, like his predecessors in 1966, referred to O’Connor and her art as “American,” rather than “Southern,” recalls Giroux’s introduction and the idea that O’Connor had escaped the confines of the South.

Giroux used the occasion of his accepting the Award on behalf of O’Connor’s mother, Regina, as a way to urge O’Connor’s significance in a world gone wrong. In what the *New York Times* described as “an indictment of literary and moral standards,”⁹⁴ Giroux noted, “In an age of mendacity, duplicity, and document shredders, the clear vision of Flannery O’Connor not only burns brighter than ever but it burns through the masks of what she called ‘blind wills and low

⁸⁹ William McPherson, “The National Book Awards,” *Washington Post*, April 12, 1972, C1.

⁹⁰ Larry Powell, “O’Connor Book Honored,” *Savannah News-Press*, April 23, 1972, F5, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 450.

⁹¹ Farrar, Straus and Giroux press release, March 15, 1966.

⁹² Harry Gilroy, “Book Awards Go to 4 U.S. Writers,” *New York Times*, March 16, 1966, 42.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Raymont, “Notes of Concern Mark Book Awards Ceremony.”

dodges of the heart.”⁹⁵ He offered O’Connor’s oft-repeated jest about Southern writers “still able to recognize” freaks, thus affirming O’Connor’s sense of humor as well as her transcendent moral vision. (Again, we see the ways in which a remark can become part of a reputation.) Giroux also took aim at past detractors and used O’Connor’s own words against them: “When she was foolishly criticized for writing mainly about one region,” he noted, “she said, ‘The region is something the writer has to use to suggest what is beyond it.’”⁹⁶ Brad Gooch recounts a conversation he had with Giroux in which the publisher described a “contretemps with a celebrated author backstage at the awards ceremony”: when the unnamed author asked Giroux, “Do you really think Flannery O’Connor is a great writer? She’s such a Roman Catholic,” Giroux responded, “You can’t pigeonhole her. That’s just the point. I’m surprised at you, to misjudge her so completely. If she were here, she’d set you straight. She’d impress you. You’d have a hard time outtalking her.”⁹⁷ While Gooch does not reveal the identity of the “celebrated author,” the person in question seems like one of O’Connor’s readers from the 1950s, wrestling with *Wise Blood* and *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and trying to categorize O’Connor in an attempt to contain her. After he drafted his acceptance speech, Giroux sent a copy of it to Regina, ending his letter with, “I’m greedy and I’m now hoping for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction, to be announced in May,”⁹⁸ but Giroux’s greed here, as always, was more for readers than revenues. While *The Complete Stories* was not nominated for a Pulitzer, the NBF revealed the finalists for the 2010 awards at O’Connor’s childhood home in Savannah. Her star had risen to the point where she was a natural part of the culture of the Awards.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Robert Giroux, copy of acceptance speech for National Book Award, 1972, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux Archives, New York Public Library.

⁹⁷ Quoted in Gooch, 372.

⁹⁸ Giroux to Regina O’Connor, 13 April, 1972.

One notable voice raised against the jury's decision was the editorial page of the *New York Times*, which devoted nearly a full column arguing against O'Connor or any other deceased authors being awarded literary prizes. Noting the desire of many critics to avoid erring on the side of conventionality and, in doing so, failing to recognize a Melville or Stendhal in their midst, the *Times* raised the issue of how events such as the National Book Awards can affect a writer's reputation: "Since every serious writer dreams of achieving immortality through his work, recognition of dead genius, no matter how belated, serves to inspire countless living young writers."⁹⁹ However, the *Times* argued that bestowing the Award on deceased writers, such as O'Connor and Allan Nevins, the winner for history that year, was unjustifiable because of the recipients' present reputations—the very reputations that the Award was meant to boost. The *Times* argued that Nevins had been "widely and deservedly recognized in his lifetime by both his academic peers and the general public as a great historian" and that O'Connor had achieved a similar stature: "Miss O'Connor was a brilliant and original writer. The quality of her work is not in dispute. But the work was praised by all serious critics in her own lifetime, and although not a popular writer, she had a devoted following." As we have seen in our examination of O'Connor's critical reception, the *Times* was straightening the road her reputation traveled and filling in the potholes, assuming its then-present status as a fact: "all serious critics" did not praise her work until after the mid 1960s, and even then, the word "all" is as problematic as the adjective "serious." Arguing that the purpose of literary prizes is to spur living authors onto greater works and that such prizes are "robbed of their meaning when living writers have to stand aside for the famous dead," the *Times* articulated the argument that one's reputation could reach a level at which further recognition was superfluous and unfair to living, working authors. Similar sentiments were expressed a year later, when, in "Confessions of a Book Award Judge,"

⁹⁹ "Author! Author!" *New York Times*, April 15, 1972, 30.

Christopher Lehman-Haupt described his experiences on the 1972 National Book Awards jury. According to Lehman-Haupt, Joseph Heller was the force behind what Lehman-Haupt called “The Tricky Little Question” of bestowing the Award on O’Connor. Lehman-Haupt, who felt that his choice, *The Book of Daniel*, would easily take the Award, ends his description of the judges’ debates with Heller calculatingly suggesting O’Connor’s *Complete Stories* and his own reaction to Heller’s maneuverings:

It wasn’t a bad choice, of course. No one could seriously object...But it wasn’t a good choice either. It didn’t call attention to a previously uncelebrated novelist. It didn’t bestow hitherto withheld recognition. It didn’t anoint. It was, come to think of it, a predictable result of mixing politics with art.¹⁰⁰

Such a mixture is what Lehman-Haupt thought he would avoid, but Heller proved to be too able a politician. To the great pleasure of Giroux and his firm, the NBF disagreed with the *Times* and Lehman-Haupt and assumed that the building of one’s reputation was not a zero-sum game where the dead could rob the living of their due.

1972 was also an important year for O’Connor’s reputation because it was the year in which Regina donated her daughter’s papers to Georgia College, O’Connor’s *alma mater* from which she had graduated in 1945 when it was Georgia State College for Women. The papers included over two thousand pages of drafts of *Wise Blood* alone, as well as other manuscripts, letters, memorabilia, and ephemera. From our current vantage point, O’Connor’s papers being archived at Georgia College seems natural and expected. However, as a Georgian columnist for the *Marion Telegraph* noted at the time:

The generosity of Mrs. Edward F. O’Connor in making this gift is overwhelming, since on the open market, bids for the collection might easily have been in the five-figure category; such universities as Texas, Yale, Harvard, and others with

¹⁰⁰ Christopher Lehman-Haupt, “Confessions of a Book Award Judge,” *Saturday Review of the Arts* 1: 4 (April, 1973), 35.

wealthy, generous contributors to their libraries, would probably have bid high for the possession of the materials of the young author whose stature as a writer continues to grow.¹⁰¹

In the year of O'Connor's death, 1964, Notre Dame Professor Thomas Stritch, a friend and correspondent of O'Connor's, wrote Regina that O'Connor's papers should definitely be deposited at Georgia College but added, "Of course, Notre Dame would be delighted to have those papers, and I would be delighted to serve as a kind of paper-weight!"¹⁰² Not surprisingly, the staff of the Georgia College Library was thrilled by Regina's largess. Gerald Becham, the initial curator of the collection, said, "It is unusual for such a small college library to be given such a valuable manuscript collection. Manuscripts of writers of Miss O'Connor's stature are usually deposited in large research libraries. Through Mrs. O'Connor's generous gift, the collection at the Georgia College Library has been greatly enhanced."¹⁰³ Charles E. Beard, Director of the Library, said that the collection would give the library "preeminence in primary sources for a total picture of Flannery O'Connor, the writer and the person."¹⁰⁴ This "total picture" is a reflection of O'Connor's reputation at this moment, when *The Complete Stories* had been met with overwhelmingly favorable reviews, when its author had been posthumously given the National Book Award, and when O'Connor's personal life—as we shall see in our later look at the interest in an authorized biography and the efforts to publish her letters—began to be viewed as a subject worthy of popular and critical interest.

Soon after Regina decided to donate her daughter's papers to Georgia College, Governor Jimmy Carter declared that Sunday, January 16, 1972, would be "Flannery O'Connor Day." A

¹⁰¹ Susan Myrick, "Flannery O'Connor," *Marion Telegraph*, January 27, 1972.

¹⁰² Thomas Stritch to Regina O'Connor, 2 December, 1964.

¹⁰³ Sally Foster, "O'Connor Reception at Georgia College Library," Milledgeville *Union-Recorder*, January 20, 1972.

¹⁰⁴ "Flannery O'Connor Papers To Be Presented Sunday," Milledgeville *Union-Recorder*, January 13, 1972.

subsequent proclamation made by Savannah Mayor John P. Rousakis proudly echoed Governor Carter's declaration. The official proclamation notes that O'Connor, a "native of Savannah, attained fame in the literary world as an author," and that "her talent as a writer was accorded recognition from many quarters."¹⁰⁵ Rousakis's proclamation notes that among her "accolades were included two Kenyon Fellowships, a grant from the National Institute of Arts and Letters, a Ford Foundation grant; the Henry Bellaman Foundation Award, and two O. Henry awards for best short story of the year" and that "her works are being used in seminaries and other institutions of learning for religious education." The proclamation also, like some of the original Southern reviewers of *Wise Blood*, claimed O'Connor as a local hero, universality be damned: "WHEREAS the citizens of Savannah, Miss O'Connor's native city, are indeed proud of her accomplishments and consider such recognition fitting and proper for someone who lived here until she was 14 and received her early education at Sacred Heart School and St. Vincent's Academy," Mayor Rousakis urged the citizens of Savannah to recognize and celebrate Flannery O'Connor Day. Rousakis urged his constituents to "use this occasion to reflect on the valuable contributions to literature made by this talented native daughter, and to pause with a prayer of thanksgiving to Almighty God for her life and good works." O'Connor the writer of fiction was now spoken of as an occasion for prayer or, as the counterman in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" calls Lucynell Crater, "an angel of Gawd." Both of these political pronouncements list O'Connor's achievements (such as the grants she earned and the titles of her books) and insist upon a growing interest in her work; they offer, in short, a reputation-by-resume that reflects, in language part publicity puffery and part commodification, how O'Connor was regarded in her native state at the time.

¹⁰⁵ Mayor John P. Rousakis, Proclamation, "Flannery O'Connor Day," January 13, 1972.

In its coverage of the reception at Georgia College Library that occurred on Flannery O'Connor Day, the Milledgeville *Union-Recorder* ran a full-page story and extensive photo spread that began by speaking of O'Connor as if she were a kind of magician: "The curtain of mystery which covers the creative process and particularly the creative process of Flannery O'Connor was lifted briefly today at Georgia College during the public showing of the Flannery O'Connor Collection at Georgia College's library."¹⁰⁶ The initial exhibit featured selections from the *Wise Blood* manuscripts and O'Connor's plan for the novel, but also included her Christening dress, paintings, cartoons, and a report card which urged the young O'Connor to "work on her spelling."¹⁰⁷ The woman was now as interesting as her work. Architectural drawings of the proposed Flannery O'Connor Room (which would be dedicated in 1974) were also displayed and O'Connor's appearance on the 1955 television interview show *Galley Proof* was screened every half hour. Over eight hundred people attended the reception in order to view these materials, a fact that suggests the degree to which this once local hero had become a figure worthy of note on a grander scale.¹⁰⁸ The program for the event blazoned critical blurbs from names with a great deal of clout (such as Alfred Kazin and Jonathan Yardley), all praising *The Complete Stories*. That the program also featured a chronology of O'Connor's life again suggests a growing interest in her biography.¹⁰⁹ As with the initial critical reception of O'Connor's previous work, readers still puzzled over who could have possibly written such material. As O'Connor once

¹⁰⁶ Foster, "O'Connor Reception at Georgia College Library."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ The statistic about eight hundred visitors is found in the *Georgia College Bulletin* LVII: 7 (March 1972) as well as a letter of 23 February, 1972 from Dorrie P. Neligan, Director of Alumni Affairs, to Robert Giroux.

¹⁰⁹ Program for O'Connor reception at Georgia College Library, Farrar, Straus & Giroux Archives, NYPL.

remarked of *The Violent Bear It Away*, “Nobody would have been found dead writing it but me.”¹¹⁰

A less-publicized yet still-revealing dedication also occurred in January, 1972, when Regina O’Connor bequeathed something other than manuscripts to a grateful institution. In the week before the reception at Georgia College, Regina donated several of her daughter’s peafowl to Stone Mountain Park, a popular site in Georgia that features the eponymous landmark as well as a restored plantation. That O’Connor’s by-then iconic birds would have been left to wander near the enormous bas-relief of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Stonewall Jackson suggests the degree to which, as in the Savannah proclamation, O’Connor was still very much claimed by her native Georgia. In its coverage of the presentation of the peafowl, the *Union Recorder* offered the remark that “only Stone Mountain itself is more enduring than the works of Flannery O’Connor.”¹¹¹ The work belonged to the world, but the woman still, according to many admirers, belonged to the South.

Sally Fitzgerald and *The Habit of Being*: Courting Regina

The story of Sally Fitzgerald’s becoming O’Connor’s authorized biographer and her simultaneous, tireless negotiations with Regina to obtain the letters that would be collected in *The Habit of Being* (1979) reflect the ways in which O’Connor’s death heightened the desire of those closest to her to fashion her reputation as they thought best. Many of the letters that poured into Giroux’s office were inquiries about who was writing O’Connor’s authorized biography—or, in some cases, requests for the writer to tackle the job him or herself. While

¹¹⁰ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 14 November, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 358.

¹¹¹ Sally Foster, “O’Connor Peacocks Presented to the Stone Mountain Plantation,” Milledgeville *Union-Recorder*, January 13, 1972.

many unknown and would-be biographers (such as the Managing Editor for *The Boston Monthly*) sought Giroux's advice and approval, there were more notable writers interested in such a project. For example, the American playwright Leonard Melfi wrote Giroux in 1964, informing Giroux that he wanted to write a biography of O'Connor: "It is rare nowadays," he wrote, "to know of a *Saint* [sic] in our midst, who is now gone, but her beautiful story should be told."¹¹² Ten years later, the novelist Mark Harris, famous for his baseball novel *Bang the Drum Slowly*, wrote Giroux to ask about his becoming the official biographer.¹¹³ As with all requests, Giroux responded to these by stating that no authorized biographer had yet been chosen. To both Melfi and Harris, however, Giroux added some words concerning the difficulty of such a project, regardless of whom was undertaking it: to Melfi, he wrote that a biography of O'Connor would not be "an easy life to do because the most significant aspects of it were all interior and creative,"¹¹⁴ while he informed Harris, "Flannery's short life was an interior one, characterized by illness and concentration on her work."¹¹⁵ These ideas were first noted by O'Connor herself, who wrote in a 1958 letter, "There won't be any biographies of me, because, for only one reason, lives spent between the house and the chicken yard do not make exciting copy."¹¹⁶ Despite Giroux's caution to these would-be biographers whose work never came to fruition, Giroux was soon guiding the hand of another potential biographer—Sally Fitzgerald—in her efforts to bring O'Connor's life to her readers. To Giroux, ever protective of his friend's memory and reputation, only an O'Connor insider would do.

¹¹² Leonard Melfi to Giroux, 28 September, 1964.

¹¹³ Mark Harris to Giroux, 17 September, 1974.

¹¹⁴ Giroux to Leonard Melfi, 30 September, 1964.

¹¹⁵ Giroux to Mark Harris, 25 September, 1974.

¹¹⁶ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 5 July 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 290.

Like Giroux, Elizabeth McKee, O'Connor's agent, had also been barraged with requests by potential biographers. In what would become something resembling a form letter, McKee responded to a professor from the University of Cincinnati by saying that her office had been approached by "a number of scholars who wanted to know personal details" but that they could not be provided:

Because the Estate and her publishers will at some future time probably publish or authorize a book concerning the personal life of Flannery O'Connor and her publishing and agency associations during her lifetime and career, we have adopted a firm rule that we cannot furnish such material to anyone who wants to independently publish a book about Flannery and her works.¹¹⁷

Such requests promoted McKee to speak with Regina about an authorized biography. Regina was not opposed to the idea and regarded an authorized biography as a means by which she could steer her daughter's reputation in a manner in which she, as her mother and confidante, would approve. McKee reported the conversation to Giroux and added her ideas about the benefits of choosing an official biographer:

A good biography would stem all the inaccuracies about Flannery which are published these days. And if one could find a good writer for such a project the writer would have the enormous advantage of Regina's cooperation and her introductions to people who knew Flannery intimately. She said hesitatingly that she wished you would write one but she was afraid that you wouldn't have the time. I said that I doubted, too, that you would undertake such a project but that I would tell you. We both agreed that Robert Fitzgerald would not be the proper writer.¹¹⁸

If, for reasons never stated, Robert was not the "proper writer" for such a work, his wife, Sally, was regarded by McKee, Regina, and Giroux as the natural choice: as Giroux wrote of Sally in the spring of 1977, "No one could be better equipped to write the biography."¹¹⁹ In early 1978,

¹¹⁷ Elizabeth McKee to Mary Stephen, 9 April, 1970.

¹¹⁸ Elizabeth McKee to Giroux, 28 April, 1972.

Sally applied for a fellowship from Radcliffe to compose a work tentatively titled, *Flannery and Regina: A Biographical Study of Flannery O'Connor*. In her application for the fellowship, Sally presented her *bona fides* as half of the team that edited and helped bring *Mystery and Manners* to light, as well as her then-current work in preparing the edition of O'Connor's letters that would become *The Habit of Being*. Noting in her application that Regina would have burned all of O'Connor's letters but that she was persuaded not to do so by her, Sally stated that she possessed the wiles to gain access to anything she needed to create a compelling biography. She noted that there were books at Andalusia teeming with O'Connor's annotations and "under maternal seal," but also that she believed she could "gain access to this material."¹²⁰ Giroux supplied a letter of recommendation for Sally's project, noting, "As [O'Connor's] publisher, I am deluged with requests from writers who want to write her life" and that he always sent such requests to Regina, who "always turned them down."¹²¹ He noted, however, what Sally had mentioned in her application: Regina had "recently asked Sarah H. Fitzgerald to undertake this work, demonstrating her keen awareness" that "Ms. Fitzgerald is uniquely qualified for the job." Radcliffe awarded the fellowship in April, 1978 and Sally began working on the project while simultaneously editing the letters. There is significance in all parties' eagerness to confirm Sally as the authorized biographer: O'Connor's mother, publisher, and agent all wanted someone to present O'Connor's character to the world in a manner they saw as accurate and that would avoid any potential dents in the armor of her reputation. What none of them could have foreseen was

¹¹⁹ Giroux to Gerald Beecham, 18 April, 1977.

¹²⁰ Sally Fitzgerald, proposal for Research Apprentice Program at Radcliffe College, January 1978. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Archives, NYPL.

¹²¹ Robert Giroux, letter of recommendation for Sally Fitzgerald's application for the Research Apprentice Program at Radcliffe College, January 15, 1978. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Archives, NYPL.

that the title *Flannery and Regina* would come to take on greater significance than any of them realized when they began collecting O'Connor's letters in earnest.

Interest in publishing O'Connor's letters gained momentum after her death. In 1967, Jean Wylder, one of O'Connor's classmates at the University of Iowa, wrote to John Farrar to propose an edition of O'Connor's letters; Farrar responded that Robert Fitzgerald was already under contract to collect them and added, "So unfortunately your doing this book is out."¹²² However, no contract was drawn between Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, which suggests that Farrar was either mistaken or warding off potential competition: attached to his same letter of refusal was a note from an assistant asking Wylder if she had any letters of her own that they might use. A short time after Wylder's inquiry, Giroux wrote to Regina who had, almost prophetically, suggested a volume of O'Connor's artwork and cartoons much like the one released in 2012; Giroux responded that he did not think it wise to publish the artwork by itself, but mentioned possibly including it in "the collection of Flannery's letters" that "one day must be brought out."¹²³ The plan of publishing O'Connor's letters, however, remained in the background until 1974, when Giroux wrote Robert Fitzgerald, telling him, "We continue to receive inquiries about an edition of Flannery's letters" and stating, "I wonder if the time has come for us to contract with you and Sally to edit such a book."¹²⁴ Noting the rise of O'Connor's reputation, Giroux added, "It's our impression that interest in Flannery's work, and in everything about her, increases every year." However, what stands out from this letter, in hindsight, are Giroux's words about Regina:

¹²² John Farrar to Jean Wylder, 6 January, 1967.

¹²³ Giroux to Regina O'Connor, 11 December, 1968.

¹²⁴ Giroux to Robert Fitzgerald, 24 July, 1974.

I've discussed this with Elizabeth McKee, who is keen for you both to do it, but she thinks it should be first cleared by Regina—probably by phone. Assuming you agree the time has now come for such an edition, would you undertake to obtain Regina's blessing? If she agrees, as I can't help thinking she will, I'd like to draw up an agreement.

Giroux's noting that the project should be "cleared by Regina—probably by phone" is interesting, as if he knew that Regina had to be handled with care and that Fitzgerald could be more convincing in conversation than in writing. While this blessing was in fact finally obtained, it did not come without a number of difficulties and caveats, all of which were related to the ways in which Regina sought to steer O'Connor's reputation as a daughter more than as an author. Regina's blessing was, as Sally was to learn, a limited one that initially brought with it what Sally viewed as the whitewashing of a reputation but which Regina viewed as the upholding of decorum and good manners.

Robert Fitzgerald responded to Giroux's request with enthusiasm: "Sally and I talked over the possibilities of an edition of Flannery's selected letters and agreed that we were all for it, that it should be done."¹²⁵ In the same letter, Fitzgerald added that Sally would do most of the work and expressed his assurance that "Regina will trust her judgment on the letters." This was to seem, in the coming years, an example of overconfidence concerning any ability to influence the stalwart Regina. Giroux wrote Regina in the autumn of 1974, excited about the project. Sally Fitzgerald wrote to Giroux during the same period to outline her plan: the volume would not be a complete edition of O'Connor's letters, but enough "to sketch for us a recognizable self-portrait of the artist as a remarkable young woman whose lineaments, guessed at from a distance, have often been forbiddingly misdrawn."¹²⁶ The collection, for example, features none of the letters that O'Connor wrote to her mother every day when she lived with the Fitzgeralds in

¹²⁵ Robert Fitzgerald to Giroux, 12 September, 1974.

¹²⁶ Sally Fitzgerald to Giroux, undated memorandum. NYPL Farrar, Straus and Giroux Archives.

Connecticut for much of 1949 and 1950. However, Sally Fitzgerald felt confident that she could provide a faithful portrait of O'Connor through the medium of her correspondence.

The next phase of the project was, predictably, a scramble for the letters themselves in which Sally made inquiries to people across the country. Giroux used his influence to assist her search whenever he could. In September of 1973, for example, he wrote to the University of Texas to ask for the letters deposited there; in June of 1975, he wrote to the poet and critic G. Roysce Smith, asking for any letters O'Connor had written to him or his fellow-poet George Marion O'Donnell. Giroux's requests reveal his desire to help fashion the kind of three-dimensional portrait Sally envisioned: he noted to Smith, "What may seem unimportant by itself perhaps might be a key piece in the total mosaic."¹²⁷ His language here recalls that of Charles Beard, the Director of the Library at Georgia College, who stated that the 1972 donation of O'Connor's papers would allow scholars to form a "total picture" of O'Connor.

A more tangled request illustrates the pains Giroux took to create the "total mosaic." As he assisted Sally in her search, Giroux learned that Duke University had, in 1961, been given a cache of letters by various correspondents, many of them members of the Gossett family.¹²⁸ In March, 1976 he wrote to Mary Louise Black of Duke University Press to inquire about the letters, noting that all of the requests of the librarians at Georgia College for them "have got nowhere." Giroux asked Black to act discreetly on his behalf:

I wonder if you'll act as my intelligence agent in the matter. Can you find out if anyone—a qualified scholar, for instance—is allowed to see them and under what circumstances?...Can you look into it quietly without ruffling anyone's bureaucratic feathers?...I want to get all the facts I can. Did someone, for example, sell the letters to Duke and were considerations of

¹²⁷ Giroux to G. Roysce Smith, 17 June, 1975.

¹²⁸ Email message to author from David Pavelich, Head of Research Services, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Duke University, April 16, 2013.

secrecy imposed?...The circuitous paths in the literary life never cease to amaze me.¹²⁹

Black responded with interesting news about a notice in *American Literary Scholarship*, an annual review by Duke University Press that surveys scholarly work published in the past year. The notice concerned an article by Thomas Gossett in a recent issue of *The Southern Literary Journal* in which Gossett described O'Connor's reactions to contemporary figures such as Isak Dinesen and J. F. Powers (both of whose work, for the record, she enjoyed). What intrigued Black was Gossett's note that he and his wife possessed "about one hundred and thirty-five letters and postcards from her, most of them written to other people" but that Regina, as executor, "has so far decided not to release them for publication" and prohibited Gossett from directly quoting them.¹³⁰ This concerned Giroux, who had been acting on the assumption that he and the Fitzgeralds would be granted full permission by Regina to print any of O'Connor's letters that they chose. (Robert Fitzgerald was the literary executor, but Regina held the rights to all unpublished letters.) Ever the optimist, Giroux was motivated by Gossett's use of the phrase "so far" and wrote to Sally that there was still the potential that they, as members of O'Connor's inner circle, would receive the permission they sought: "The one ray of hope is Regina's saying that she wants more time to think about allowing publication of the very letters you and I have been assuming we can publish."¹³¹ Tactfully, he advised Sally to "drop Regina a line, telling her of your plans."¹³² Nine days later, Giroux sent Sally a copy of Gossett's article, noting that what Gossett had revealed here presented a challenge for their current project:

¹²⁹ Giroux to Mary Louise Black, March 26, 1976.

¹³⁰ Thomas F. Gossett, "Flannery O'Connor's Opinions of Other Writers: Some Unpublished Comments," *The Southern Literary Journal* 6: 2 (Spring 1974), 82.

¹³¹ Giroux to Sally Fitzgerald, 7 June, 1976.

¹³² Ibid.

I don't see how we can bring out a book of her letters without including this large batch of 135 letters which has been deposited (under seal) at Duke University. Since Regina has refused to allow Gossett to quote from the letters, she may well refuse to make copies available for your book. Once again, Regina is the key to the problem...I hope you can get her to cut the Gordian knot.¹³³

Unbeknownst to Giroux and the Fitzgeralds, Regina had been recently engaged in other negotiations about her daughter's letters—negotiations that suggested the Gordian knot was still awaiting its Alexander the Great.

Regina had her own ideas about the propriety of publishing her daughter's letters or those of anyone else. Approximately a month before Giroux had written to Sally about the problem, O'Connor's friend and frequent correspondent, the playwright Maryat Lee, had composed an article for the *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, which had begun in 1972 under the editorship of Caroline Gordon. Lee's article was a reminiscence about the year in which she had first met O'Connor and she wanted to quote directly from O'Connor's letters to her. Anticipating Regina's sensitivity about this request, Lee sent Giroux a copy of her yet-to-be-sent letter to Regina, asking if she should make any changes for the sake of diplomacy. Giroux thought that Lee had struck the right note in her request to quote the letters so that, in Lee's words, "O'Connor could speak for herself and not have it filtered."¹³⁴ However, Regina denied Lee's request on the grounds that her daughter was not alive to grant the permission or defend herself from any repercussions that might result from the publication of some of her letters: "I couldn't give you or anyone else permission to quote from letters I haven't read," she wrote Lee, adding, "I'm sure you understand how I feel about this."¹³⁵ This sparked a heated correspondence

¹³³ Giroux to Sally Fitzgerald, 16 June, 1976.

¹³⁴ Maryat Lee to Giroux, 25 April, 1976.

¹³⁵ Regina O'Connor to Maryat Lee, 9 May, 1976.

between these two women, one who wanted to humanize O'Connor's public persona and one who wanted to guard it. Lee responded by asserting her assumptions about the positive effects that quoting O'Connor's unpublished letters would have on her reputation:

It is important right now to encourage publication of her letters to balance the odd fancies and notions some of the literary bigwigs have about her interests. Some of the things you may not think are anybody's business, you know, but since my purpose in this reminiscence is to show how many things interested Flannery, not just a narrow range of things, I think it is useful.¹³⁶

Lee mentioned, in the same letter, a rumor she had heard about Sally's work on what would become *The Habit of Being* and stated, "I hope it's true, for I feel her beautiful letters will extend her place in the world of 'letters,' and that we have reached a time when the world is hungry to know more of her and the letters will help enlarge her already considerable influence." Regina, however, still resisted, not out of mere stubbornness or a desire for control, but because she was genuinely concerned about her daughter's reputation and betraying her privacy. Her reply to Lee raises all of the issues regarding reputation that have run through the story of Robert Fitzgerald's and Giroux's introductions to *Everything That Rises Must Converge* and *The Complete Stories*:

Maryat, about the letters, I can't help but feel Flannery wrote those letters just to you and I wonder if she would like them published. (I'm trying to be honest with you.) I don't know any other way. I appreciate what you said in your letter and it would be nice for people to know another side of her, but people are funny and those who believe that there is no other side, you simply can't change them.¹³⁷

This "other side" of O'Connor was exactly what Fitzgerald and Giroux had sought to convey in their introductions to her books; remember, there was very little biographical work done on O'Connor until decades after these essays. Regina did, however, add, "Please give me a little more time to think about it" before closing—a portent of her eventually relenting to some degree.

¹³⁶ Maryat Lee to Regina O'Connor, 18 May, 1976.

¹³⁷ Regina O'Connor to Maryat Lee, 30 May, 1976.

She wrote to Lee again a few days later, saying that Lee could quote the letters directly but only after specific “personal references” were deleted.¹³⁸ The grateful Lee responded that same day, thanking Regina for her permission and expressing her confidence that the letters “would correct some misconceptions afloat”¹³⁹ about O’Connor, such as that she was a homebody who only cared for her writing and her church. What truly stands out in Lee’s response regarding O’Connor’s reputation is Lee’s assertion that her friend was well aware that her reputation would extend beyond Milledgeville and continually evolve after her death: she told Regina, “I’ve come to think that Flannery was quite aware that she would or could become a celebrated person—even more than when she was alive” and added that she had “solid reason to believe” that Flannery thought her letters would someday be published. Lee attempted to comfort Regina by telling her that readers would not be looking for private or salacious material; rather, most readers were “people who want to know and take to their hearts not only the literary works, but the person (as seen in letters) who wrote them for the simple reason that such persons give them courage and company.” In short, Lee viewed the publication of letters as a means of heightening readers’ appreciation of an author’s work and life—a view with which Regina agreed, as long as people’s feelings were not hurt. To her, a “total picture” or a “total mosaic” was acceptable in theory, but social strictures trumped literary portraiture.

Another issue involving Lee that arose during the scramble for the letters was an esoteric legal one. During the time in which Sally was preparing *The Habit of Being*, Lee was interested in producing an annotated edition of O’Connor’s letters to her and had already contacted Regina about such a collection. Sally had disliked the way in which Lee had portrayed O’Connor in the *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin* piece for which she had sought Regina’s permission to quote the

¹³⁸ Regina O’Connor to Maryat Lee, 4 June, 1976.

¹³⁹ Maryat Lee to Regina O’Connor, 4 June, 1976.

letters. She wrote Giroux, “I greatly fear that Maryat’s accounts would be subject to the same rules of dramatic rearrangement. She wanted, after all, to be a playwright.”¹⁴⁰ Sally here gives the first indication of what would become her editorial style of non-interference with the voice to be heard in the letters. She wrote Lee and asked for her letters from O’Connor—but never indicated to Lee that the letters would appear in *The Habit of Being*, an omission that Lee later resented and which she expressed to Sally in an angry letter.¹⁴¹ Sally responded by writing Lee that she “planned to give a great deal of importance to Flannery’s friendship with you” and that she hoped Lee would help her “put together a good and objective book about our rare friend.”¹⁴² The yoking of “good and objective” reflects Sally’s assumptions about how to best further O’Connor’s reputation: by trusting the letters to speak for themselves. Lee fumed to Giroux—who was copied on Sally’s letter—that any commentary she offered in her proposed edition of the letters would be honest and faithful to Flannery: “It is just such holier than thou patristhormistical, blind, worshipful, inhuman, titless commentary on Flannery that I have been noted and repelled by.”¹⁴³ She added, “My condolences for having to deal with La Fitzgerald!” Giroux tactfully navigated the fault lines of this epistolary earthquake, writing Lee that he appreciated her intentions but that, legally, Regina, and, by extension Sally, had the advantage.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ Sally Fitzgerald to Giroux, 14 February, 1977.

¹⁴¹ Maryat Lee to Sally Fitzgerald, 12 February, 1977.

¹⁴² Sally Fitzgerald to Maryat Lee, 21 February, 1977.

¹⁴³ Maryat Lee to Giroux, 7 March, 1977.

¹⁴⁴ “The recipients of the letters own the pieces of paper, but the words and their use for publication belong to Flannery’s estate. This is an aspect of copyright law that few people are familiar with—understandably, since it is a complicated distinction” (Giroux to Maryat Lee, 20 April, 1977). This distinction between paper and words was one that Giroux was ready to claim a year earlier if any of the letters at Duke made their way into print: he wrote to Sally at that time that “the papers may belong to Duke, but the publishing rights belong to Regina” (Giroux to Sally Fitzgerald, 7 June, 1976).

Lee did not appreciate what she viewed as Giroux's sophistry, and expressed as much in subsequent letters to Regina and Sally. But she did relent in her pursuit of her own collection and her letters from O'Connor run throughout *The Habit of Being*. Sally's unadorned version of O'Connor had come another step closer to reality.

Lee's skirmish with Regina over a few letters for a personal reminiscence in a journal prefigured the longer battle that occurred between Sally and Regina over hundreds of letters for a book. Sally had sent Regina a number of letters that she wanted to include in what would become *The Habit of Being* and asked her permission to reprint them. Regina returned them to Sally with a number of editorial demands—enough of them to warrant Sally's responding in a long letter of May 1, 1977. Many of Regina's requests were matters of what she regarded as good breeding, as when she asked that Sally edit the letters in which O'Connor referred to her Uncle Louis by his first name: the thought of Flannery calling him "Louis" in print seemed scandalous to Regina, who feared that this informal style would make her daughter seem like had not been raised well. Sally noted, "We can't, of course, change Flannery's wording" and urged Regina to view this detail as one that would allow O'Connor to be seen as more three-dimensional:

I wish you would think over again whether to use the name of the uncle. Flannery always called him Louis—and there wasn't the slightest disrespect in her doing so. She was crazy about him, and admired him very much, as well. But if she is made to call him only "Uncle" then it begins to sound a little unreal. She ought to sound as real as possible. Reality was what Flannery prized, both supernatural reality, and the reality that is part of everyday life...I hope you will reconsider and let her call him by the name she always used for him and to him. Especially as he is shown to be so very nice in the letters.¹⁴⁵

Regina eventually relented on this point, but only because of Sally's plea. In other parts of Sally's letter, she argues for the same practice of letting O'Connor sound like herself, rather than

¹⁴⁵ Sally Fitzgerald to Regina O'Connor, 1 May, 1977. Emphasis in subsequently quoted passages in original.

the version her mother thought more proper. For example, Regina expressed her dismay over any association in print between O'Connor and alcohol, which, as one can detect in Sally's reply, Regina assumed made her daughter seem more like F. Scott Fitzgerald than Thomas Merton:

By "drank with this one and that one," Flannery obviously meant that she had a glass of sherry at some literary cocktail party. There isn't the slightest suggestion anywhere that she "drank," or went out drinking. I'll cut it out if you want me to, but I don't think it is at all misleading, really.

Sally's use of "obviously" here reveals a hint of exasperation. Sally was also aware of the fact that when O'Connor lived with her and Robert in Connecticut, she sometimes ended the day with a martini as she and her landlords conducted their literary discussions—a fact that Robert had already mentioned, in print, in his introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.¹⁴⁶ However, she knew better than to play this card against Regina at this time: if she wanted to foster what she saw as an honest image of O'Connor, she had to cajole her mother.

Sally's response contains other such moments where one can imagine her shaking her head in disbelief yet communicating her ideas in the most diplomatic, patient language. For example, Sally wrote that O'Connor's mentioning Brainard Cheney's past occupation as speechwriter for the Governor of Tennessee was no poor reflection on Cheney or the Governor, since "All governors, presidents, etc. have speech-writers working for them" because "They really don't have time to write their own speeches." She similarly had to explain that "whiskey priest" was "a very well-known joking term, not made up by Flannery" and certainly not the slur on the priesthood that Regina imagined. Sally, however, became more emphatic when Regina suggested they remove O'Connor's 1954 letter to the Fitzgeralds in which she described Robert Lowell's decision to leave the church:

I really don't think it is too personal. This is Flannery at her best. Very few people had the courage to tell him what they thought. He made a rather public

¹⁴⁶ Robert Fitzgerald, introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, xiv. Also see Gooch, 181.

scene about leaving it, and said to many people what she quotes him as saying to her. I think it is better to let her say exactly what she said to him in return.

Clearly, the two women had different ideas of what constituted “Flannery at her best”: Sally prized her friend’s honesty while Regina prized unruffled feathers. Sally won this battle: the letter was eventually included in *The Habit of Being*. And, in a reminder of the sometimes comic note that these negotiations struck, Sally also informed Regina that O’Connor’s mentioning in the letter that Lowell had spouted “some other claptrap about Henry Adams being a Catholic anarchist”¹⁴⁷ was not a cause for concern: “Henry Adams...was a Boston writer who died a hundred years ago. No problem about mentioning him.”¹⁴⁸

This is not to say that Sally was insensitive to personal issues being put into print: in her note that she did not think Allan Tate would “mind the reference to his getting ‘mobbed,’” since O’Connor’s term referred to “rowdy students” and not Tate himself, Sally parenthetically added, “I am of course omitting all references to the domestic struggles and sorrows of the Tates throughout the collection,” since, “That is the kind of thing that I think has no place in the book.” Similarly, in her comments about the term “whiskey priest,” Sally states that some of O’Connor’s remarks about “the very Irish parish priest in Milledgeville” could be “toned down” since the person was still alive. In general, Sally’s response reveals her desire to tread very carefully in the epistolary presence of Regina.

Sally was less constrained, however, in her correspondence with Giroux. The day after she composed the response to Regina, she wrote to inform him, “Regina is sharpening her blade”¹⁴⁹ and enclosed a copy of her May 1 letter concerning O’Connor’s Uncle Louis and other

¹⁴⁷ O’Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, 26 April, 1954, in *The Habit of Being*, 71.

¹⁴⁸ Sally Fitzgerald to Regina O’Connor, 1 May, 1977. Emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁹ Sally Fitzgerald to Giroux, 2 May, 1977. Emphasis in original.

matters. She also, however, bore worse news about a second batch of letters that Regina had just returned with a new set of demands:

Her objections to letting Flannery speak in [the first batch] were as nothing to her objections to the second, far more interesting, batch. Which she tore to pieces. Gutted. I found it yesterday when I got home. I felt sick when I saw what she wants to do, and the shell she is willing to leave.

Sally's frustration here reflects her assumptions about one's reputation: better a reputation formed by an author's own words than a "shell." Sally informed Giroux that she planned to write Regina a letter "on the general principle of allowing Flannery to be herself" and remind her that "if Flannery had written her stories to please Milledgeville, or to refrain from displeasing it, nothing whatever would have come of her work." That each woman's point of view was understandable only heightened the drama: Regina viewed O'Connor more as a daughter and member of a community where personal matters were simply not put into print than as a transcendent artist whose letters would illuminate her greatest themes. What frustrated Sally so much was that she sympathized, to an extent, with Regina's concerns: "Obviously," she continued in her letter to Giroux, "I don't want her to wound or embarrass living people...Flannery herself was careful not to hurt people deliberately. But Regina's scruples are not of the same kind." Sally promised Giroux that she would send him a copy of her next letter to Regina, one in which she hoped to be "careful and effective." She also asked Giroux to not mention any of these dealings to Elizabeth McKee or to communicate with Regina himself, "lest she feel beleaguered." Courting Regina for the sake of a more genuine portrait of O'Connor would take a degree of political skill. Giroux responded that he found her first letter to Regina "excellent" and that he would not intervene in her plans unless asked; he also offered her his moral support, ending his letter with, "Flannery—of all writers!—should not be falsified."¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Giroux to Sally Fitzgerald, 6 May, 1977.

Sally's next letter to Regina reads, as she intended, as a primer for anyone interested in collecting any public figure's letters in the interest of furthering a literary reputation. Unlike her previous letter, in which she enumerated her points as they related to specific issues, this one is an eleven-paragraph plea to let O'Connor's letters speak for their author, just as she reminds Regina that one reviewer of *Mystery and Manners* praised the work because "there is always audible the sound of her voice speaking; never the sound of a machine clattering."¹⁵¹ Regina had requested, for example, that O'Connor's letters to Fr. James McCown, in which she discussed a number of theological issues, be excised; Sally responded that Fr. McCown had already removed anything he thought too personal when he donated the letters to Vanderbilt University and that Regina was not seeing the reputation-forest for the trees of social unease:

They are very good examples of the kind of open, frank, joking, but deeply serious and mutually respectful friendship it is possible for a Catholic to have with a priest. You know, most non-Catholics don't know that such a thing is possible. I do hope you will consent to have these letters made public. Flannery's loyalty to the church was strongly determined throughout her life, and that fact alone gave her the right to criticize what she felt deserved criticism. Fr. McGown certainly thought nothing she said offensive.

Similarly, Regina asked that O'Connor's remark about not wanting to bathe at Lourdes ("I am one of those people who could die for his religion easier than taking a bath for it"¹⁵²) be removed on the grounds of near-blasphemy. Sally responded with the notion that O'Connor's balking at the idea was not "unnatural," that "Many, even most, people would, and wouldn't mind saying so," and, more importantly, that in the subsequent letter in which O'Connor "ascribes the unexpected recalcification of her hip bone to Lourdes, she does more to bear witness, and is more humble and truthful, than she would have been if she had held her tongue in the beginning." Sally thus appealed to Regina as both an executor and a Catholic, implying that by

¹⁵¹ Sally Fitzgerald to Regina O'Connor, 4 May, 1977. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵² O'Connor to Betty Hester, 14 December, 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 258.

allowing O'Connor to "speak her mind on both scores," Regina would be affecting the reputation of her daughter and her church in a more positive way.

Sally also urged Regina to consider the ways in which a more open edition of O'Connor's letters would suit her daughter's personality and work. Sentences such as, "I do truly believe that her own strong respect for everyday reality and the concrete ought to be honored by letting her speak" and, "Let her talk about your life together: she does you proud, and you would do her proud to recognize that and let her speak freely" characterize both Sally's tone and argument. Her penultimate paragraph carries her greatest plea for allowing O'Connor's thematic concerns to surface in her letters—which were, according to Sally, the cause of greater and more meaningful discomfort than O'Connor's mentioning neighbors by name or questioning the decisions of a priest:

I think that we have to remember that if Flannery had written in her stories only what would please the townspeople, she never would have written everything that has made her one of the most honored of modern American writers. As you said to me, "she had a message." She observed and made live the world around her, in her stories—and in her letters, as well. So the letters carry the message, too. Ought we to stifle her voice, in that case? She always made people think, even if she didn't always make them comfortable. She will make them think by her letters, too, if we let them speak for her.

Playing on Regina's pride in her daughter and recasting O'Connor as a minor prophet herself, Sally hoped that her argument would sway Regina from her reluctance to add more pieces to the "total mosaic." Ending, "We'll work it out," and typing, "With love, as always" above her signature, Sally could not have but felt that Regina would understand the importance of her daughter's honest, unfiltered voice being heard in her uncensored letters.

Her hopes were dashed when she received Regina's response. That this letter was typed, unlike the usually-handwritten letters that Regina favored, and copied suggested the earnestness of her response. While she began with a joke—"I guess this letter is special to use this carbon

paper”¹⁵³—Regina twice mentioned that she was at a “disadvantage” by not having all the letters in question in hand, suggesting the degree to which this supposed friendly collaboration was underpinned with an aura of tough negotiations. Regina quickly got to the point: “I understand that you can’t change Flannery’s words, but as you say we can leave out certain things or paraphrase her actual words—When we went into this I had no idea you wanted to use all the letters to Betty—Just remember she wrote those to Betty as her friend not to the public.” Her demands about O’Connor’s letters to Betty Hester were followed by others, which were worded even more emphatically:

As to the term “whiskey priest,” I never thought for a minute Flannery was the originator, but we are not use [*sic*] to priest [*sic*] being referred to in that manner, remember that wasn’t for the public but for Betty. The Irish priest is still alive and lives in Atlanta. I want it out. He’s a friend of mine...About Cal Lowell, I think it’s to [*sic*] personal and I want it left out...The part about drinking “with this one and that one” I want it left out.

Clearly, Sally’s treatise on the benefits of letting an author speak for herself was not as “careful and effective” as she had hoped. Nothing was about to change the set opinions of Regina, who was eighty years old at the time and confident about her own assumptions regarding the difference between literary property and social propriety.

As his supporters used to state, “Let Reagan be Reagan,” Sally tried one final time to convince Regina of the need to let Flannery be Flannery. Responding to Regina’s questioning whether or not Fr. McGown had the right to donate his letters to Vanderbilt, Sally informed Regina that this was common practice with authors of note and that no one could stop scholars from reading the letters or describing their contents in print. “This is precisely the reason,” she explained, “why I have wanted to use as much as I have—so that Flannery’s own words can be

¹⁵³ Regina O’Connor to Sally Fitzgerald, 15 May, 1977. Emphasis in original.

heard, and not just what somebody said she said."¹⁵⁴ In the remainder of this three-page letter dated three days after Regina's typed response, Sally conceded to some of Regina's demands, informing her, for example, that she would cut the reference to the "whiskey priest" (but unable to resist adding it was "a joke of course") and that she would remove O'Connor's words about being "irked" because an acquaintance had "failed to mention you when she wrote thanking F. for a weekend." Other previously-debated issues again arose, but this time, Sally was beginning to show the exhaustion that lay underneath the diplomacy: she reminded Regina that the idea of anyone regarding O'Connor as a drinker was absurd, since it was "abundantly clear from all the letters that Flannery was almost completely abstemious"—and, like the cortisone treatments that O'Connor discussed which Regina also wanted cut, the martinis had been previously mentioned in Robert's introduction to *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. She also sought to correct Regina's impression of Robert Lowell as one to whom religious convictions were a private matter and therefore best excised from the letters.¹⁵⁵ Sally most emphatically argued for the inclusion of O'Connor's letters to her friend, Betty Hester, which Regina thought too personal:

The letters to Betty contain more about Flannery's reading, her literary and theological interests than almost any other of her correspondence. In some ways, they are the most important letters that she wrote. I have chopped them to pieces, to eliminate the things that she said to her in confidence...but many of the things she wrote to Betty are of great public interest in setting down her reading interests and her generosity in helping people out with their own writing.

Regina conceded this point, although Hester only allowed the letters to be published after her identity was changed to "A." Perhaps the most subtle of Sally's maneuvers in the letter was to acknowledge that Regina's "disadvantage" in not seeing all the letters could be rectified:

¹⁵⁴ Sally Fitzgerald to Regina O'Connor, 18 May, 1977. Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁵ Regarding Lowell, Sally wrote, "Cal Lowell has never hesitated to announce that he has left the church, and mention of the fact by Flannery simply suggests that she, too, knew what everybody else had also been told. And that she was grieved by his leaving it" (Sally Fitzgerald to Regina O'Connor, 18 May, 1977).

I think it perhaps it would be better not to bother you with any more of these packets [of letters] that you have to return. Why don't I simply get the whole manuscript together...and when it is entirely finished, as I think it ought to be, I will xerox it and send it off to you, so that you can get a sense of it as a whole, and can ask for any further revisions or cuts you would like to make.

Such a solution hinged upon Sally's hunch that Regina, upon reading the whole of the collection, would view the letters as integral to the "total picture" of O'Connor or, as she remarked earlier in the letter, that people "are not as easily embarrassed as we might think." Sally wisely closed the letter by mentioning that she had recently met the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston and that, when she was introduced to him as the person "working on Flannery's letters," the Cardinal "spoke very very highly of Flannery." While there is no reason to doubt Sally's retelling of the scene, she must have known that mentioning it could not hurt her cause.

As we have seen before, Sally found in Giroux a colleague to whom she could vent her frustration. On the same day as her last plea to Regina, she wrote Giroux about her struggles:

Herewith a copy of my letter to Regina, sent today. I feel like the Laocoön. If you don't want to plow through all three pages, you needn't. This is just for the record. If you do finish it, you will see that I propose to send her just the completed manuscript, rather than throwing myself on the spears every few days. Maybe the whole thing will make her see that Flannery does not come out badly. Her excisions are often fantastic, I fear, and some of them I will restore in the final version, in the hope that she may not notice, or may have ceased to mind, or may have seen the light of reason. She is so afraid of anything personal that she has crossed out references to Henry Adams and Wyndham Lewis...I do not lose hope, however.¹⁵⁶

While, in her letter to Regina, Sally offered to send the complete manuscript as a way to atone for any past "disadvantages," here she remarks that doing so was a way to avoid the "spears" and "fantastic" demands of a woman who would not "see the light of reason." The most interesting phrase in Sally's letter, however, is "come out": how O'Connor would "come out" in the

¹⁵⁶ Sally Fitzgerald to Giroux, 18 May, 1977.

collected letters was a matter of whose assumptions about literary reputation would inform the editing.

Eventually, Sally won more battles than she lost and *The Habit of Being* was published in 1979 to universally glowing reviews. Its reception will be examined presently, but before doing so it is worth pausing to note that how the entire series of negotiations recalls *The Aspern Papers*, Henry James's novella about a devoted yet unscrupulous biographer who seeks the lost love letters of Jeffrey Aspern, a American poet whose former mistress and muse resides in a Venetian home as decrepit as herself. The narrator engages in a number of underhanded dealings to ingratiate himself to Aspern's former lover and her innocent, although fully-grown, niece. After the object of Aspern's affections suspects the narrator's motives, she asks him about the ethics of his hunt:

“Do you think it's right to rake up the past?”

“I don't know that I know what you mean by raking it up; but how can we get at it unless we dig a little? The present has such a rough way of treading it down.”

“Oh, I like the past, but I don't like critics,” the old woman declared with her fine tranquility.

“Neither do I, but I like their discoveries.”

“Aren't they mostly lies?”

“The lies are what they sometimes discover,” I said, smiling at the quiet impertinence of this. “They often lay bare the truth.”

“The truth is God's, it isn't man's; we had better leave it alone. Who can judge of it—who can say?”

“We are terribly in the dark, I know,” I admitted; “but if we give up trying what becomes of all the fine things? What becomes of the work I just mentioned, that of the great philosophers and poets? It is all vain words if there is nothing to measure it by.”

“You talk as if you were a tailor,” said Miss Bordereau whimsically.¹⁵⁷

The conversation highlights, as only James could, the complexities involved in the creation of a literary reputation. Like Regina, the elderly yet powerful old woman argues for a limited view of a person's “total mosaic”; like Sally, the narrator seeks the truth of his hero's reputation while

¹⁵⁷ Henry James, *The Aspern Papers and Other Stories* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60.

discounting the potential emotional cost. (To be fair, Sally was never a “publishing scoundrel” like James’s narrator.) Coincidentally, he elsewhere compares obtaining the letters to cutting the Gordian knot, making the comparison all the more perfect.

By all accounts, Regina was always much more concerned with how her daughter would be regarded personally by their friends and neighbors than with how she might be thought of as the author of the fiction she labored to produce: according to Giroux, Regina once asked him, in the presence of O’Connor, “Mister Giroux, can’t you get Flannery to write about nice people?”¹⁵⁸ And in one pointed letter to Cecil Dawkins, O’Connor fumed over Regina’s desire to have her daughter write a novel more like *Gone with the Wind* and less like *Wise Blood*:

Do you think, she said, that you are really using the talent God gave you when you don’t write something that a lot, a LOT, of people like? This always leaves me shaking and speechless, raises my blood pressure 140 degrees, etc. All I can ever say is, if you have to ask, you’ll never know.¹⁵⁹

Perhaps this arrangement of evidence is unfair to Regina, who also, by all accounts, supported O’Connor in her habit of art throughout her life—a life during which she lived with her mother for all but five of her thirty-nine years. As Jean Cash states, “With limitations of intellect and personality over which she had little control, Regina Cline O’Connor still contributed significantly to the ultimate success of her brilliant daughter.”¹⁶⁰ What the publication history of *The Habit of Being* reminds us is that those who affect an author’s “ultimate success” and reputation need not be members of the *literati*. Regina, quite naturally, viewed O’Connor as a daughter first and an author second, which is why she struggled for so long with Sally and others who viewed O’Connor in a manner similar to the way in which James’s narrator viewed Jeffery

¹⁵⁸ Quoted in Gooch, 317.

¹⁵⁹ O’Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 3 April, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 326.

¹⁶⁰ Cash, 173.

Aspern: an artist “free and general and not at all afraid,” able “to feel, understand, and express everything.”¹⁶¹

Sally’s dedication of *The Habit of Being* to Regina, with the words, “To Regina Cline O’Connor in gratitude for letting readers come to know her daughter better,” reflects her acknowledgement of Regina’s power and need to be recognized. But like the two other O’Connor insiders who preceded her, Sally used the occasion of an introduction to shape O’Connor’s reputation. Again, ironically, the author of the introduction would get the last word. By the time that *The Habit of Being* was published, readers were less in need of the kind of biographical portrait offered by Robert Fitzgerald in 1965 or Giroux in 1971. However, like her predecessors, Sally assumed that readers did need further correcting of O’Connor’s image and reputation, this time mostly through the words of the author herself. Sally argues in her introduction that the literal images of O’Connor may be empirically accurate but emotionally false; they have affected her reputation in an unfortunate, because misleading, way: “The camera was often as unjust as what was written about her.”¹⁶² By analogy, Sally argues that O’Connor’s letters reveal not an invalid confined to her farm with her mother, but a vivacious person whose *joie de vivre* informed her existence:

These letters reveal her to have been anything but reclusive by inclination: to have been, on the contrary, notably gregarious. She enjoyed company and sought it, sending warm invitations to her old and new friends to come to Andalusia. Once her inviolable three-hour morning stint of writing was done, she looked for, and throve on, companionship... She participated in the lives of her friends, interested herself in their work, their children, their health, and their adventures.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ James, 33.

¹⁶² Sally Fitzgerald, introduction to *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), ix.

¹⁶³ Ibid., xi.

Sally also explains her choice of title, another means by which she sought to affect the ways in which readers imagined O'Connor. Telling of a time when O'Connor left a copy of Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* at the Fitzgeralds' home, Sally explains that, just as Maritain explored the "habit of art" or "attitude or quality of mind" as "essential to the real artist as talent," O'Connor possessed the "habit of being," defined by Sally as "an excellence not only of action but of interior disposition and activity that increasingly related the object, the being, which specified it, and was itself reflected in what she did and said."¹⁶⁴ In simpler terms, Sally argued that O'Connor's life was one of her great artistic creations and she urged readers to study it—through the unadorned letters—as they would O'Connor's fiction. Perhaps this argument helps to explain why the authorized biography was never completed: the life lived was found, as Sally insisted, in the letters and friendships, not in records of travel or other, more routine components of biographies. Such an idea is much like the one that Giroux shared with Leonard Melfi and Mark Harris when each inquired about becoming O'Connor's authorized biographer.

One of Sally's minor arguments about how one should regard O'Connor has been mentioned in chapter 1 but deserves examination in this context. Sally notes that *The Habit of Being* is not "an exercise in hagiography" and that O'Connor's "tongue could take on a quite unsaintly edge."¹⁶⁵ The subject around which Sally dances before eventually facing it is O'Connor's treatment of racial issues in general and African-Americans in particular. Calling O'Connor's thoughts on these subjects "an area of sensibility in her that seems to have remain imperfectly developed," Sally argues that "The Artificial Nigger" contains "the germ of a final enlargement of understanding for Flannery O'Connor" and that O'Connor's "will was never in danger on the score of racism": while she "disliked the stridency of the militant movement and

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., xv.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., xvi.

some of its spokesmen,” O’Connor “recognized the need for, and approved of, Martin Luther King’s crusade.”¹⁶⁶ With the tenth anniversary of the Detroit and Newark riots and the King assassination very much in the national consciousness as she wrote, Sally knew that she had to address the charge of racism that she anticipated some would level against O’Connor. (As it turned out, the reviewers in 1979 proved Sally’s fears to be unfounded, but some writing thirty years later, as we shall see, were not always as forgiving.) Ultimately, she argued that O’Connor’s early death was all that limited her from the kind of social understanding that Sally presumably possessed: “You write, she repeatedly said, what you can. And you become, we can further infer, what you can. Her accomplishments in both making and being are too impressive to support cant from any side.”¹⁶⁷ Despite her protests to the contrary, if Sally’s introduction is not an exercise in figurative hagiography, it is akin to the spirit of the Catholic Church’s bestowing of the honorific *nihil obstat*, a Latin phrase meaning “nothing hinders” a person’s potential canonization.

In January, 1979, shortly before *The Habit of Being*’s March publication, Giroux wrote to Regina and enclosed a clipping from *Library Journal*: “The first review is excellent,” he explained, “It’s an advance notice and couldn’t be better.”¹⁶⁸ He ensured her that anyone to whom Regina wanted to send a copy had received one, with a card stating, “Compliments of Regina Cline O’Connor.” He also assured Regina of the volume’s quality: “I think Sally did an excellent job of editing and that the book, in its final form, gives the reader an accurate and attractive picture of Flannery—especially her sense of humor.”¹⁶⁹ As the initial reviews were

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., xvii.

¹⁶⁸ Giroux to Regina O’Connor, 8 January, 1979.

¹⁶⁹ Giroux to Regina O’Connor, 5 February, 1979.

published, Giroux kept sending copies to Regina, noting that he was “particularly pleased with Walter Clemons’s reference to you in *Newsweek*” and that, at a publication day luncheon at the Player’s Club, “we shall all drink a toast to you in absentia.”¹⁷⁰ He also sent her a copy of the book to inscribe for his personal collection; Regina replied to this request and many of Giroux’s letters with appreciation. While there is nothing in Giroux’s correspondence to suggest that he was providing mere flattery, one can sense his desire to assure Regina that she had done right by her daughter in allowing Sally to present her letters to the world. With Sally’s biography still under construction, Giroux knew that the bridge to Andalusia could not, under any circumstances, be burned.

The reviews of *The Habit of Being* were as laudatory and enthusiastic as Sally, Giroux, or Regina could have wished. Indeed, even an admirer of O’Connor might find some of the reviews almost hyperbolic, as if the critics were attempting to collectively atone for their initial inability to recognize O’Connor’s talent. For example, Robert Phillips, in *Commonweal*, urged his readers, “Buy this book, for the rare insight into one of our rarest, and in her time least-appreciated artists.”¹⁷¹ Similarly, the review in *Library Journal* that Giroux sent to Regina called the collection “one of the most unique achievements in twentieth-century literature.”¹⁷² John R. May, writing in *America*, described it as “one of the finest recent instances of a venerable art form and a major contribution to American letters,”¹⁷³ while Richard H. Brodhead, in *The Yale Review*, deemed it the “richest volume of correspondence by an American author to have

¹⁷⁰ Giroux to Regina O’Connor, 12 March, 1979.

¹⁷¹ Robert Phillips, “On Being Flannery O’Connor,” *Commonweal* 106 (April 13, 1979), 220.

¹⁷² Quentin Vest, “An Intensity of Intelligent Purpose,” *Library Journal* 104 (January 15, 1979), 194.

¹⁷³ John R. May, “Seekers and Finders,” *America* 140 (June 16, 1979), 499.

appeared in many years.”¹⁷⁴ Across the Atlantic, Graham Greene described the book as “a fascinating collection of letters by a fine American novelist much neglected over here in her lifetime.”¹⁷⁵ Writing in the *New York Times*, John Leonard stated, “There hasn’t been a better collection of letters since the two-volume set of D. H. Lawrence published by Viking in 1962.”¹⁷⁶ His colleague at the *Times*, Richard Gilman, noted early his *Book Review* assessment that “Byron, Keats, Lawrence, Wilde and Joyce come irresistibly to mind”¹⁷⁷ as one reads O’Connor’s letters. And Michael True, writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, called *The Habit of Being* “one of the great collections of letters in American literature, equal in range and quality to those of Hawthorne and Melville and comparable, in what they tell us about the craft of fiction and writing, to the prefaces of Henry James and the notebooks of Henry David Thoreau.”¹⁷⁸ In the *Southern Literary Journal*, Melvin J. Friedman questioned this level of praise and noted that “O’Connor herself would probably have been amused and slightly embarrassed by this assertion,”¹⁷⁹ but his was the minority report. Several reviewers drew comparisons between *The Habit of Being* and *The Nabokov-Wilson Letters*, also published that same year,¹⁸⁰ while the *New York Times*’ year-end list of the best books included *The Habit of Being* alongside the recently-published letters of Lewis Carroll, D. H. Lawrence, and Virginia

¹⁷⁴ Richard H. Brodhead, “A Life of Letters,” *Yale Review* 69: 3 (Spring 1980), 451.

¹⁷⁵ Graham Greene, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *The Observer* (December 7, 1980), 27.

¹⁷⁶ John Leonard, “Impatient with Freudian’s Down-Home Humor,” *New York Times*, March 9, 1979, C23.

¹⁷⁷ Richard Gilman, “A Life of Letters,” *New York Times Book Review*, March 18, 1979, 1.

¹⁷⁸ Michael True, “The Luminous Letters of a Writer of Genius,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* (April 16, 1979), R7.

¹⁷⁹ Melvin J. Friedman, “‘The Human Comes Before Art’: Flannery O’Connor Viewed Through Her Letters and Her Critics,” *Southern Literary Journal* 12: 2 (1980), 115.

¹⁸⁰ See, for example, Janet Groth’s reflection on the power of epistolary collections in *Commonweal*, December 1, 1979. Other reviewers drew similar comparisons between Nabokov and O’Connor as letter-writers.

Woolf.¹⁸¹ Such comparisons reflected the then current stage of O'Connor's reputation: no longer was she immediately compared to Caldwell, Williams, or Capote, but was now being spoken of, quite casually and earnestly, in the same sentences as the names of the masters she admired. One reviewer even called *The Habit of Being* an exercise in "essential insight and self-confrontation," superior to what he saw in Faulkner's *Collected Letters*: "scrupulously arranged tedium."¹⁸² When Carson McCullers was mentioned in these reviews, it was only to illustrate the gulf between them, as when Friedman quoted a letter in which O'Connor described *Clock Without Hands* as "the worst book I have ever read."¹⁸³ The seed Giroux had planted in his introduction to *The Complete Stories* about O'Connor transcending the South had taken root.

Many, if not all, of the reviewers spoke of how the letters demonstrated the praiseworthy aspects of O'Connor's character: a "country humor and shrewd intelligence backed up by a considerable spiritual toughness."¹⁸⁴ Many reviewers similarly dwelled upon O'Connor's courage as she faced her death. In *Comparative Literature*, Frank E. Moorer and Richard Macksey praised the way in which the letters reveal O'Connor "fighting the energy-sapping advances of her disease but never currying sympathy,"¹⁸⁵ just as Gilman similarly noted that the letters present O'Connor as "heroic" and "a model of valor."¹⁸⁶ Richard H. Brodhead argued that the letters reveal a woman who did not "permit herself emotions like rage and self-pity,"¹⁸⁷

¹⁸¹ "A Selection of the Best Books of 1979," *New York Times*, November 25, 1979, BR4.

¹⁸² Douglas Hill, "As She Lay Dying," *Books in Canada* 8: 5 (May, 1979), 17.

¹⁸³ Quoted in Friedman, "'The Human Comes Before Art': Flannery O'Connor Viewed Through Her Letters and Her Critics," 119.

¹⁸⁴ Brodhead, "A Life of Letters," 452.

¹⁸⁵ Frank E. Moorer and Richard Macksey, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O'Connor, *Modern Language Notes*, 94:5 (December 1979), 1274.

¹⁸⁶ Gilman, "A Life of Letters," 32.

as Paul Gray, in *Time*, stated, “She had cause to be bitter but never was.”¹⁸⁸ Such sentiments about O’Connor as “an exceptionally valiant woman”¹⁸⁹ were epitomized in the headline above Edmund Fuller’s review in *The Wall Street Journal*: “A Gallant Life Amidst Profound Insight.”¹⁹⁰ The majority of reviewers also mentioned her sense of humor, love of reading, and humility. John F. Desmond, in *World Literature Today*, noted that the letters revealed O’Connor’s “love of truth” but also “streaks of intolerance and righteous anger, of literary and religious dogmatism, of tactlessness and insensitivity.”¹⁹¹ However, as was the case with Friedman’s questioning the general assessment of the letters’ quality, this was a rare disparaging voice.

Amidst the collective enthusiasm for the collection, one notes the desire of many critics to use the occasion of their reviews to correct what they saw as misunderstandings of O’Connor’s life and works, especially the idea that she was a recluse, confined to her mother’s house and living like a Southern Emily Dickinson. Writing in *National Review*, J. O. Tate argued that *The Habit of Being* put to rest the notion of O’Connor’s hermitage: “Any lingering canards about O’Connor’s isolation, which never were true, must henceforth be gone or be damned.”¹⁹² A piece in *Kirkus Reviews* offered a similar observation: “The idea of the spinster lady with lupus living cut off from the world in Milledgeville, Georgia...is dispelled.”¹⁹³ Miles

¹⁸⁷ Brodhead, “A Life of Letters,” 452.

¹⁸⁸ Paul Gray, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Time* 113:10 (March 5, 1979), 87.

¹⁸⁹ Unsigned review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Publisher’s Weekly* 216: 3 (January 15, 1979), 120.

¹⁹⁰ Edmund Fuller, “A Gallant Life Amidst Profound Insight,” *Wall Street Journal* 193 (March 12, 1979), 18.

¹⁹¹ John F. Desmond, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor *World Literature Today* 54: 2 (1980), 289.

¹⁹² J. O. Tate, “The Village Theist,” *National Review* 31: 11 (March 16, 1979). 364.

Orvell, in *The American Scholar*, noted that the letters prove that “we would be much mistaken to assume that Flannery O’Connor led a life which was either provincial or reclusive,”¹⁹⁴ as John Keates, in the London *Spectator*, noted, “Immobility does not necessarily imply isolation.”¹⁹⁵ Such an understanding of O’Connor was urged *New Catholic World*, in which Helen Ruth Vaughn made a similar point that the “small geography of [O’Connor’s] physical life...in no way circumscribed the vast geography of her mind.”¹⁹⁶ Why so many readers (among them Mary Gordon, who wrote of O’Connor’s “isolation”¹⁹⁷) accepted the idea of O’Connor’s life as one lived in “seclusion”¹⁹⁸ is an interesting part of the story of her reputation. Perhaps her work was so strange, so Southern, and so Catholic that isolation could be used as an easy explanation for artistic intensity—again, much as we see with common images of Emily Dickinson. So much had changed for O’Connor’s reputation since *Wise Blood*, but the urge to account for and explain away her art still remained. Such an urge, however, was routinely dismissed by O’Connor’s admirers, as when Paul Granahan began his review by saying he was “always dismayed by the prevailing belief that she was a bizarrely morbid Southerner who hated life in general” and expressed relief that the publication of her letters would “do much to dispel the myth that O’Connor was a sour-tempered and unbalanced individual obsessed with death.”¹⁹⁹

¹⁹³ Unsigned review of *The Habit of Being* by Flannery O’Connor, *Kirkus Reviews* 47 (January 15, 1979), 109.

¹⁹⁴ Miles Orvell, “Blessed in Deprivation,” *The American Scholar* 48:4 (Autumn 1979), 562.

¹⁹⁵ John Keates, “Balancing Act,” *Spectator* 243 (December 22, 1979), 29.

¹⁹⁶ Helen Ruth Vaughn, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *New Catholic World* 222 (July-August 1979), 188.

¹⁹⁷ Mary Gordon, “The Habit of Genius,” *Saturday Review* (April 14, 1979), 43. Gordon’s full quotation reflects her assumption about O’Connor: “Isolated as she was, O’Connor made and kept many friends through her correspondence.”

¹⁹⁸ Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Southern Quarterly* 18: 2 (1980), 92.

Isolation could be, they argued, a geographical fact but irrelevant to the “true picture”: as a reviewer for the *South Carolina Review* stated, “She lived on ‘Andalusia,’ the family farm just outside of Milledgeville, Georgia, but there is no indication in her letters that she felt isolated...Her correspondence helped prevent any feeling of isolation.”²⁰⁰

Part of the reviewers’ awe of O’Connor’s character may have been bolstered by the book’s cover art, which featured a phoenix rising from its regenerative flames (Fig. 20). Here, too, Sally had a hand: she had discovered the woodcut of the phoenix while working on *The Habit of Being* at Harvard’s Houghton Library and sent a card with its likeness to Giroux, suggesting that he consider it for the cover: “A phoenix, not only appropriate by simply being a bird, but doubly so, considering what F. reveals about her struggle with the first blow of her illness in these new letters now, at twelve years’ distance from her death.”²⁰¹ Giroux found the image a perfect representation of what he valued about O’Connor: a month later, he sent a copy of the proposed cover to Sally, noting it was by “one of our best” artists (the noted designer Janet Halverson) and that it was “rather unexpected but I think quite good.”²⁰² The fact that Sally and Giroux chose this particular image is a small yet telling tile in the “total mosaic” they sought to create. While critics are not in the habit of judging books by their covers, the striking image of the phoenix, linked with O’Connor’s name, may have helped to reinforce the image of O’Connor that her editor and publisher hoped to sustain.

¹⁹⁹ Paul Granahan, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Best Sellers* 40:3 (June 1980), 109.

²⁰⁰ Jan Norby Gretlund, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *South Carolina Review* 12:1 (Spring 1980), 61.

²⁰¹ Sally Fitzgerald to Giroux, 16 March, 1977.

²⁰² Giroux to Sally Fitzgerald, 7 April, 1977.

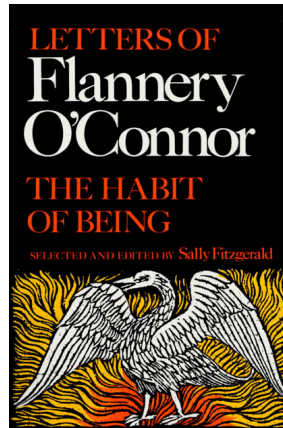


Figure 20

Besides their obvious and effusive praise of O'Connor the woman and artist as viewed through her letters, reviewers also praised Sally Fitzgerald's skill as an editor and, more importantly in light of the scuffle with Maryat Lee and her negotiations with Regina, her decision to remain in the background and allow O'Connor to speak for herself. In *The Nation*, Robert B. Shaw praised Sally as an "unobtrusive"²⁰³ editor, while Melvin J. Friedman noted that she had "performed a noteworthy service" by avoiding "the elaborate paraphernalia of the scholarly edition,"²⁰⁴ praise echoed by Eugene Current-Garcia, who, in *Southern Humanities Review*, noted the "sheer artistry" of Sally's editorial decision to provide only a "minimum of commentary."²⁰⁵ Sally's silencing her own voice heightened O'Connor's: Josephine Hendin wrote of O'Connor's voice as heard in the letters and praised Sally for "bringing her back to speak to us again,"²⁰⁶ much as Janet Varner Gunn, in *American Literature*, noted, "What we have here in this remarkable collection is a Flannery O'Connor who speaks for herself by

²⁰³ Robert B. Shaw, "Jane Austen in Milledgeville," *The Nation* 228: 16 (April 28, 1979), 474.

²⁰⁴ Friedman, "'The Human Comes Before Art': Flannery O'Connor Viewed Through Her Letters and Her Critics," 114.

²⁰⁵ Eugene Current-Garcia, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O'Connor, *Southern Humanities Review* 14 (1979): 373.

²⁰⁶ Josephine Hendin, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O'Connor, *New Republic* 180:10 (March 10, 1979), 35.

speaking to others.”²⁰⁷ Richard H. Brodhead described the collection as “the record of a remarkable voice.”²⁰⁸ This vindication of Sally’s method surfaces throughout the reviews, as when Paul Gray in *Time* described her editorial work as “an act of model scholarship” because, “When factual information is needed, she gives it succinctly and then stands back.”²⁰⁹ Many reviewers singled out O’Connor’s letters to “A.” as the best in the collection, suggesting that Sally’s battle with Regina to include these highly personal letters was worth the cost.²¹⁰ Robert Fitzgerald was among Sally’s admirers: he wrote to Giroux to congratulate him on “the book you and Sally made,” stating that he found it “very much like the water of life.”²¹¹ In *World Literature Today*, John F. Desmond states that O’Connor’s readers usually “only saw what they wanted to see, not the full reality,” but that Sally presented O’Connor in all of her “complexity”²¹²—a reminder of the “total picture” and “total mosaic” that she and Giroux sight to present through the letters.

Other reviews of *The Habit of Being* contain more praise for Sally, and the praise of an editor’s work on such a project may be expected from many reviewers. What emerges as a less expected although significant theme is the idea that *The Habit of Being* was, in many ways, the biography that Sally would never complete. In his *National Review* piece, J. O. Tate assessed the collection with language which any biographer would thrill to hear in a review of his or her

²⁰⁷ Janet Varner Gunn, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *American Literature* 53: 3 (November 1981), 522.

²⁰⁸ Brodhead, “A Life of Letters,” 456.

²⁰⁹ Gray, review of *The Habit of Being*, 87.

²¹⁰ See for example, the *Atlantic Monthly*, where the reviewer states, “One stream of letters (most notably directed to a young woman known only as ‘A’) takes readers further into the forests of theology than most non-Catholics will want to travel, but they show the singular force and flexibility of her mind.” Unsigned review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Atlantic Monthly* 243: 6 (June 1979), 96.

²¹¹ Robert Fitzgerald to Giroux, 16 February, 1979.

²¹² Desmond, review of *The Habit of Being*, 289.

work, noting that Sally deserved praise for “producing the broadest and deepest of all the accounts of O’Connor’s life and mind.”²¹³ In the *Antioch Review*, Nolan Miller stated that the letters may not “tell us all there is to know” about O’Connor, but “it is improbable that any biographer will ever be able to surpass it. Or dare try.”²¹⁴ *Kirkus* argued, “These hundreds of letters give O’Connor’s tough, funny, careful personality to us more distinctly and movingly than any biography probably would,”²¹⁵ while John R. May described the collection as one superior even to a hypothetical autobiography, since it “lacks a self-conscious design.”²¹⁶ May continued, “Together with Robert Fitzgerald’s brief biographical introduction to *Everything that Rises Must Converge*, it should satisfy, too, our need for a biography”²¹⁷ while, in *The American Spectator*, Miles Orvell wrote, “We have something better than the single view of any biographer: a collection of O’Connor letters that adds up to a complex self-portrait, a volume that should markedly enrich our understanding of a writer whose reputation has continued to grow since her death in 1964.”²¹⁸ And, in both *Ms.* and *Maclean’s*, reviewers quoted O’Connor’s stricture about “lives spent between the house and the chicken yard” not providing compelling biographical material and noted “Her own letters contradict her,”²¹⁹ since the collection could be read as “the biography that O’Connor thought could never be.”²²⁰ Many readers of this time knew that Sally

²¹³ Tate, “The Village Theist,” 364.

²¹⁴ T. C. Holyoke, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Antioch Review* 37: 3 (Summer 1979), 373.

²¹⁵ “*The Habit of Being*: Letters of Flannery O’Connor,” *Kirkus*, 109.

²¹⁶ May, “Seekers and Finders,” 498.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ Orvell, “Blessed in Deprivation,” 562.

²¹⁹ David Livingstone, review of *The Habit of Being*, by Flannery O’Connor, *Maclean’s* (April 23, 1979), 64.

²²⁰ Bette Howland, “An Unsuspecting Autobiographer,” *Ms.*, 8: 1 (July, 1979), 39.

was working on the authorized biography, but their praise of her work as an editor argued against the need for a conventional account of O'Connor's formative years and artistic development.

As time passed, Giroux received many inquiries about the status of Sally's project. In a 1985 letter, he wrote that Sally's authorized biography was "nearing completion" and he hoped to see it published in 1986.²²¹ When he was asked in 1990 by the theologian and translator Elmer O'Brien, "When, if ever, is the Sally Fitzgerald *Life* of Flannery O'Connor to appear?"²²² Giroux described Sally as a "perfectionist" but assured O'Brien that she was "hard at work on it" and that "When it is ready, I'm confident it will be a good book."²²³ Two years later, Giroux wrote the biographer Deborah Baker that Sally had been working on the book for almost ten years and that "the first draft has been completed."²²⁴ Despite his enthusiasm for the project (or his covering for Sally's delays), Giroux found that Sally had made herself obsolete by doing what she intended: letting O'Connor speak for herself through her letters to the world—a world that did, unlike Dickinson's, write to her.

The Habit of Being was awarded a National Book Critics Circle Award for 1979; as was the case with the National Book Award, a work by O'Connor was honored by a slight bending of the rules. The NBCC Awards, established in 1974, sought to honor work in Fiction, Nonfiction, Poetry, and Criticism; the categories have since expanded to include Biography and Autobiography. At the time of *The Habit of Being*'s release, however, the judges—for the first

²²¹ Giroux to John Loudon, 17 June, 1985.

²²² Elmer O'Brien to Giroux, 12 March, 1990.

²²³ Giroux to Elmer O'Brien, 19 March, 1990.

²²⁴ Giroux to Deborah Baker, 21 September, 1992. Fitzgerald's papers are now housed at Emory University. Bruce Gentry, editor of *The Flannery O'Connor Review*, has described what Giroux called a "first draft" as more of a series of essays "written toward the greater work of putting it all together as a biography." Bruce Gentry, email message to author, 3 October, 2013.

time—bestowed a Board Award for O'Connor's total work, capped by *The Habit of Being*.²²⁵

Sally accepted the Award for O'Connor, noting in her acceptance speech the importance of “that indomitable survivor,” Regina, and the guidance and enthusiasm of Giroux, who gave O'Connor “the leeway and support she needed while she was writing, and who has continued to serve her well since she had to stop.”²²⁶ But the part of her speech that relates the most to O'Connor's reputation is that in which Sally mentions O'Connor's character and what she valued:

In writing all these letters, over the years, Flannery O'Connor didn't mean to tell us what she was like. She didn't think it would matter. Her attention was directed to the given addressee and the subject at hand. What she did think would matter was her fiction, and whether or not that was alive, and well thought of. The honor you are showing her today, more than fifteen years after her death, is proof enough that it was, and is. But what she was like turns out to matter, too, as witnessed by what you say of the place her letters hold in the body of work she left us.²²⁷

O'Connor was concerned not with the reputation of herself, but of her work, a concern that Sally argued was answered by this posthumous recognition and which countered the once-threatening assumptions of Regina. Worth noting here is that the correspondence between Sally and Giroux—like that between anyone connected to this part of O'Connor's posthumous career—never mentions any financial rewards for publishing *The Complete Stories* or *The Habit of Being*. The editorial work was a labor of love and a desire to honor their friend by sharing their private understandings of her with the public. The true value of O'Connor's art was one that none other than John Huston and the Fitzgeralds' children would soon test in their film version of *Wise Blood*. How they and artists in other mediums, such as Cecil Dawkins on the stage and the

²²⁵ Herbert Mitgang, “Flanagan and Taylor Win Book Prizes,” *New York Times*, Jan 8, 1980, C9.

²²⁶ Sally Fitzgerald, Speech to the National Book Critics Circle, January 17, 1980. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Archives, NYPL.

²²⁷ Ibid. Emphasis in original.

writers of the *Schlitz Playhouse Theater* on television, adapted O'Connor's work and affected her reputation is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 5

Adaptation and Reputation: O'Connor on Film, Television, and the Stage

In 1968, Robert Giroux wrote Robert Fitzgerald about a strange request he had received from the actor Tony Randall, who sought to mount a film production of “The Artificial Nigger.” Randall was not yet branded as Felix Unger, but his reputation as history teacher Harvey Weskit in *Mr. Peepers* had taken root, causing Giroux to comment, “I think it would be a miracle for *anyone* to make a good movie of ‘The Artificial Nigger,’ let alone Tony Randall.”¹ The project never materialized but Giroux’s response reflects a number of issues regarding the ways in which the translation of an author’s works into film or other media can affect his or her reputation. First, Giroux’s calling such an adaptation a “miracle” suggests his belief that certain texts are simply untranslatable into other media, a belief that would most likely strike one of O’Connor’s readers as reasonable: the story climaxes in pages of interior action, where Mr. Head feels the “action of mercy” working on him as he stands as still as the statue upon which he gazes. (Such a belief was, we shall see, also held by some of the critics who reviewed John Huston’s *Wise Blood*.) Second, the phrase “let alone Tony Randall” suggests that, if such a project is attempted, the “right” people need to be involved. As Joy Gould Boyum notes in *Double Exposure: Fiction Into Film*, “If one were to accept traditional notions of what is possible for the screen, the work of Flannery O’Connor might seem utterly, unequivocally unfilmable.”² At best, adaptation is a bet against very difficult odds.

Randall, whose film never materialized, was but one of many who sought permission to adapt O’Connor’s work. Amateurs and professionals alike frequently asked O’Connor’s agent,

¹ Robert Giroux to Robert Fitzgerald, 29 March, 1968. Farrar, Straus & Giroux Archives, New York Public Library. Unless otherwise stated, all letters are from this collection.

² Joy Gould Boyum, *Double Exposure: Fiction Into Film* (New York: Universe Books, 1985), 175.

Elizabeth McKee, for her legal blessings. She was asked to grant film rights to “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” and *A Memoir of Mary Ann*, Hungarian television rights for “The Comforts of Home,” and theatrical rights to “Good Country People.” To all of these requests and many others, McKee referred the writers to Regina (who had final say) but often wrote about them to Giroux, who reassured her that her “instincts were right” in counseling Regina to refuse permission.³ Those in O’Connor’s inner circle assumed that her work should remain wholly literary and not become sullied by contact with any “self-taught screenwriter”⁴ (as one petitioner described himself) or more powerful players in the Hollywood machine, such as Robert E. Jiras, Natalie Wood’s one-time makeup artist turned producer, who sought to secure the rights to “The River” and sell them to the highest bidder.⁵

However, Giroux, McKee, and Regina did relent, and did so enthusiastically, when a figure from O’Connor’s past sought to bring his vision of *Wise Blood* and “O’Connor country” to the big screen. In the early 1970s, Michael Fitzgerald—the oldest son of Robert and Sally—attempted to make a name for himself as a Hollywood producer. Like so many others, however, he eventually found his imagined career to be an example of the triumph of hope over experience. “It was the usual story in Hollywood,” he explained regarding his many false starts and lack of progress.⁶ Eventually, he decided that if he were going to expend effort and money making a film, he would make one that he found interesting from start to finish. Fitzgerald wanted to produce a film that would, in his words, give his audience “a jolt” and eventually decided upon the source material that could produce such an effect:

³ Giroux to Elizabeth McKee, 30 June, 1966.

⁴ Donald Canton to Robert Giroux, 28 January, 1977.

⁵ Giroux to Regina O’Connor, 16 September, 1966.

⁶ Michael Fitzgerald, “Interview,” *Wise Blood* DVD, directed by John Huston (Criterion Collection, 2009).

Now what do I pick? If I can actually get it made, it'll be so different from anything else that people will be compelled to pay attention to it. And so different from anything else that I will be able to attract talented people to help in the making of it. And suddenly, Flannery sprang back into my memory.⁷

O'Connor had babysat for the Fitzgeralds when she stayed at their parents' Connecticut home during the period in which she finished *Wise Blood*. But the aspiring producer claimed this neat family tie was secondary in importance to the force of O'Connor's reputation as someone whose work was "so different from anything else" and who could supply the necessary "jolt" to both an audience and Fitzgerald's career. Her reputation had, according to Fitzgerald, prompted him to embark upon his adaptation of *Wise Blood*, an adaptation endorsed by Giroux, McKee, and Regina.

Fitzgerald assumed that only an O'Connor insider could be trusted with adapting the work of O'Connor the outsider. But the insider was not alone: others joined him, such as his brother, Benedict, who co-wrote the screenplay, and Sally, who dressed both the actors and the sets. As with the publication and introductions of *Everything that Rises Must Converge* and *The Complete Stories*, a member of O'Connor's inner circle attempted to bring her work before a larger audience and shape the ways in which her work would be received. Eight years after *The Complete Stories* and fifteen years after her death, elements of her reputation would resurface and be reinforced as critics responded to a "third edition" of *Wise Blood*, this time with John Huston complicating its reception by virtue of his own artistry and attitudes towards O'Connor's thematic concerns.

The continuing reputations of Huston and O'Connor might seem to suggest an insurmountable incompatibility and a doomed partnership. By the time *Wise Blood* went into production in 1979, Huston was well-known for a body of work and personal life that suggested

⁷ Ibid.

a dismissal of all that O'Connor, quite literally, held sacred. While filming *The Bible: In the Beginning* in 1966, Huston remarked:

Every day I'm being asked if I am a believer and I answer I have nothing in common with Cecil B. DeMille. Actually, I find it foolishly impudent to speculate on the existence of any kind of God. We know the world was created and that it continually creates itself. I don't think about those things, I'm only interested in what's under my nose. Also, I believe that whatever man erects, builds and creates has a religious meaning. A painter, when he paints, is religious. The only religion I can believe in is creativity. I'm interested in the Bible as a universal myth, as a prop for numerous legends. It's a collective creation of humanity, destined to solve, provisionally and in the form of fables, a number of mysteries too disquieting to contemplate for a nonscientific era.⁸

However, two aspects of Huston's reputation as a director made him a desirable choice for the brothers Fitzgerald. The first was his long record of skillfully adapting novels into film. Since his first feature—*The Maltese Falcon* in 1941—Huston had consistently demonstrated profound respect for his source material. In a review of *Wise Blood*, Vincent Canby noted, "Movies do many things, but they don't honor the written word,"⁹ a rule to which Huston often proved the exception. Almost all of his films were adaptations of previously-published fiction or previously-produced plays, and he showed a remarkable ability to translate different genres, such as pulp fiction (*The Maltese Falcon*, *The Asphalt Jungle*), adventure yarns (*The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*, *The African Queen*), and moody character studies (*The Night of the Iguana*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*) into successful films. Huston also never shied away from more highbrow literary sources, such as *The Red Badge of Courage* and *The Man Who Would Be King*; as David Thomson noted, Huston showed a "Selznick-like urge to cover the respectable

⁸ Axel Madsen, *John Huston: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), 212-213.

⁹ Vincent Canby, "Many Try, But 'Wise Blood' Succeeds," *New York Times* March 2, 1980, D19.

literary waterfront.”¹⁰ And while *Moby-Dick* and *The Bible* may be now regarded as his less-impressive adaptations, he had a reputation as a director who never sought to modify or “improve” his source material. As he said of *The Maltese Falcon* in particular and adaptation in general, “You simply take two copies of the book, paste the pages, and cross out what you don’t like.”¹¹ The second aspect of Huston’s reputation that made him desirable to the Fitzgeralds was his straightforward shooting style, which one critic aptly described as “unassuming naturalism.”¹² As Benedict Fitzgerald noted, such a style was crucial to an adaptation of *Wise Blood* because it reflected O’Connor’s own directness of vision:

We were lucky to have thought of John Huston. There were others that we were considering but they would have been so taken by the allegorical nature of the storytelling—by either what they would have considered the grotesque or by the allegory itself—that it would not have been a story told the way good stories are told: very straightforward. John had never done anything but. He just liked to tell the story the way it was.¹³

Huston’s invisible—as opposed to heavy—hand was noted by some of the film’s original reviewers, as when John Simon noted that Huston had not “indulged himself in directorial liberties”¹⁴ or when Joy Gould Boyum noted that Huston’s camera “never underscores, never labors and never exploits.”¹⁵ If the Fitzgeralds were going to entrust *Wise Blood* to a director,

¹⁰ David Thomson, “John Huston,” in *The New Biographical Dictionary of Film* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 425. Huston’s desire to adapt more literary works continued after *Wise Blood*: his next film was *Under the Volcano* and his last was *The Dead*.

¹¹ Jim Harrison, *Off to the Side* (New York: Grove, 2002), 261. Quoted in Jeffrey Meyers, *John Huston: Courage and Art* (New York: Crown Archetype, 2011), 66. Many viewers forget that Huston’s *The Maltese Falcon* was actually the third attempt to film Hammett’s novel and that Huston’s success in adapting it came from him painstakingly replicating so much of the novel’s exact dialogue and structure.

¹² Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, “Loners and Sin,” *New Statesman*, January 18, 1980, 102.

¹³ Benedict Fitzgerald, “Interview,” *Wise Blood* DVD.

¹⁴ John Simon, “Christ Without Christ; Nijinsky Without Nijinsky,” *National Review*, May 2, 1980, 543.

¹⁵ Joy Gould Boyum, “Two Artists: John Huston and Flannery O’Connor,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 22, 1980, 21.

they would only trust one who would “honor the word” by not attempting to change the manner in which O’Connor presented her chosen issues. Whether he believed in Christ was not as important as whether he believed in O’Connor.

Huston shot *Wise Blood* in Macon, Georgia and—like everyone else involved in the production—worked for the minimum salary.¹⁶ With its budget of less than two million dollars (as opposed to eight million for his previous film, *The Man Who Would Be King*) and use of locals in many supporting roles, *Wise Blood*, like the novel upon which it was based, prompted a good deal of critical head-scratching at its marketability. The film premiered at Cannes and was then shown at the New York Film Festival where it received, as we shall see, enthusiastic reviews. However, no major distributor offered to market it or manage its broad theatrical release: Archer Winsten (in the *New York Post*) described the film as “an artistic triumph that commercial distributors were slow to grab when it first surfaced at the Film Festival. They wouldn’t even grab when heavy crix said ‘ooh-la-la’ with laurel wreaths.”¹⁷ Writing in *The Village Voice*, Andrew Sarris called *Wise Blood* “precisely the kind of property that would have made the late Louis B. Mayer turn over in his grave”¹⁸ and elsewhere predicted, “It’s doubtful that this film will find a mass audience.”¹⁹ Huston himself acknowledged, “It was hardly the sort of thing to attract investors.”²⁰ Eventually, New Line Cinema—then a fledgling distributor of art house films—bought the distribution rights, prompting a reporter for *Premiere* to note that even a “front page rave in *Le Monde*” could not woo the Hollywood power brokers; the reporter also

¹⁶ Huston was paid \$125,000 instead of his usual \$400,000. See Meyers, 372.

¹⁷ Archer Winsten, “‘Blood’ Repels and Attracts,” *New York Post*, February 18, 1980, 26.

¹⁸ Andrew Sarris, “Of Blood and Thunder and Despair,” *Village Voice*, February 25, 1979, 39.

¹⁹ Andrew Sarris, “Blood Tells,” *Village Voice*, October 8, 1979, 40.

²⁰ John Huston, *An Open Book* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980), 369.

quoted Michael Fitzgerald as “baffled by the response of the majors,” saying, “I don’t quite understand why...but they’re terrified of it.”²¹ Fitzgerald later noted that distributors regarded it as “the least commercial movie ever made.”²² However, anyone familiar with O’Connor’s reputation—as Fitzgerald, despite his presumed perplexity, surely was—could identify the source of that terror: O’Connor’s work was financially risky because it was morally so. Taking O’Connor seriously entailed examining, or at least entertaining, her assumptions about the gulf between God and man, a gulf into which theatergoers and Hollywood studios were never eager to peer. Writing in *Time*, Frank Rich noted, “Though the movie is by no means difficult to comprehend on its own terms, Huston does not attempt to win over disbelievers. It is not surprising that independent producers, rather than a Hollywood studio, took the considerable risk of financing the project.”²³ Such a pronouncement assumes that Huston sought to proselytize rather than dramatize. *Variety* described the film as “downbeat” and one “needing hard sell due to its ambivalent treatment of the kinky religious scene, though it does give some insight into the extension of these loner fanatics into sects.”²⁴ The writer, of course, assumes that Huston was making an expose about cults, rather than telling the story of a man whose intuition—his wise blood—leads him to a truth beyond the walls of any church. In a laudatory review, David Ansen described the film as “determinedly uningratiating”²⁵ to its viewers, a characteristic that, of course, would not prompt distributors to come calling. Similarly, *Box Office* advised its industry readers that the “excellent performances” and the “low-level documentary style photography

²¹ “Nepotism Runs in the Blood,” *Premiere*, December, 1979, 9.

²² Lawrence Grobel, *The Hustons* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1989), 714.

²³ Frank Rich, “The Sound and the Fury,” *Time*, February 25, 1980, 50.

²⁴ Gene Moskowitz, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *Variety*, June 6, 1979.

²⁵ David Ansen, “Huston at His Best,” *Newsweek*, March 17, 1980, 101.

make this one of the best pictures in Huston's long career—but unfortunately not the most commercial.”²⁶ Rex Reed, however, regarded the film's lack of commercial appeal as a badge of artistic honor, stating, “*Wise Blood* makes no bid for box-office sweepstakes. It looks like it was made by people with no idea of what commercial gimmicks are” and calling this “unusually welcome” lack of gimmickry “a strength.”²⁷ This discussion of O'Connor's lack of marketability calls to mind Rinehart editor John Selby's feud with O'Connor over the first nine chapters of *Wise Blood*, when he sought (in O'Connor's words) to “train it into a conventional novel.”²⁸ As O'Connor wrote of the book to Elizabeth McKee in the summer of 1948, “I cannot really believe they will want the finished thing.”²⁹ O'Connor anticipated the novel's lack of commercial appeal but wanted it to be published by a sympathetic, although not necessarily empathetic, house: “I want mainly to be where they take the book as I write it.”³⁰ The same principle applied to the Fitzgeralds and Huston, who never sought to train the source material into a conventional film.

The press kit provided to the first audiences at the New York Film Festival reflects the state of O'Connor's reputation in 1979, as well as the means by which Fitzgerald and his co-producer (his wife, Kathy) attempted to present a more accessible version of O'Connor's work to a moviegoing public. After beginning with the puffery one would predict in a press kit (“This chilling adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's brilliant first novel returns director John Huston to

²⁶ Jim Robbins, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *Box Office*, April 14, 1980.

²⁷ Rex Reed, “Huston Triumphs with ‘Wise Blood,’” *New York Daily News*, February 27, 1980, 29.

²⁸ O'Connor to Elizabeth McKee, 17 February, 1949, in *The Habit of Being*, 9.

²⁹ O'Connor to McKee, 21 July, 1948, in *The Habit of Being*, 6.

³⁰ O'Connor to McKee, 3 February, 1949, in *The Habit of Being*, 9.

the hardheaded style of *Fat City*³¹), the Fitzgeralds and their publicity team offered six quotations by O'Connor on a separate page headed, "Author Flannery O'Connor on *Wise Blood* and Life." The first of these, taken from a letter concerning *The Violent Bear It Away*, seems intended to disarm the skeptics who had pigeonholed O'Connor as a "religious fanatic": "I suppose a book like mine attracts all the lunatics."³² Another reflects the producers' desire to highlight O'Connor's humor, however dark: "In my own experience, everything funny I have written is more terrible than it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny."³³ The most important quotation, however, is one from a letter to John Hawkes that suggests how the producers wanted their viewers to regard Motes's struggle and eventual self-mutilation. It is a letter containing what they viewed as the central issue of the film, one which, we shall see, the film's leading man had debated with Huston and which the critics would soon debate with each other:

The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It's full of unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically.³⁴

O'Connor's point here is that Motes responds to his wise blood in the only way he can imagine: by "working it out dramatically" and blinding himself. As Michael Fitzgerald noted, "If Haze were an educated person, he might have joined a monastery. But he's a hillbilly and he goes all the way as he can... When he finds the truth in the last way he expects to find it, he goes all the

³¹ Press kit for *Wise Blood*, New Line Cinemas, Archives of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. All subsequent quotations from the press kit are from this source.

³² O'Connor to Elizabeth Bishop, 23 April, 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 391.

³³ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 24 September, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 105.

³⁴ O'Connor to John Hawkes, 13 September, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 350.

way with what he could do.”³⁵ The last of the press kit’s quotations was taken from the same letter to Hawkes and was clearly included by the producers to suggest that Motes’s struggle was not born of madness or fanaticism, but a desire to accept as truth what the world seemed to mock: “My gravest concern is always the conflict between an attraction for the Holy and the disbelief in it we breathe with the air of the times.”³⁶ Such a conflict was acknowledged by those critics who viewed Motes in a sympathetic light but was wholly disregarded by others, who viewed Motes as a fool or fanatic for acting on the promptings of his “attraction for the holy”—his wise blood. The remainder of the press kit offered a biography of Huston in which *Wise Blood* was described as “steeped in rural mysticism” and the result of O’Connor’s “vivid and baroquely imaginative world.” The absence of the adjective “grotesque” is surely no accident; “baroquely imaginative” suggests a more fanciful milieu. So much effort was expended on this topic because the Fitzgeralds knew that if Motes repulsed the viewers or was viewed as a caricature from the Bible Belt, *Wise Blood* would be much less effective and a betrayal of O’Connor’s intentions. It would be a film grounded in mockery instead of the uneasy empathy that O’Connor sought to evoke.

Many critics responded to the film in ways that the Fitzgeralds and Huston had hoped. Vincent Canby, writing in the *New York Times*, offered the most enthusiastic praise of all the original reviewers, calling *Wise Blood* “one of John Huston’s most original, most stunning movies” that proved the aging director to be “in his top form.”³⁷ In a 2008 interview, Michael Fitzgerald noted, “The reviews from all over the world were extraordinary. I don’t think people had quite seen anything like this. And most people were not familiar with Flannery O’Connor

³⁵ Michael Fitzgerald, “Interview,” *Wise Blood* DVD.

³⁶ O’Connor to John Hawkes, 13 September, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 349.

³⁷ Vincent Canby, “‘Wise Blood,’ Huston’s 33d Feature,” *New York Times*, September 29, 1979, 12.

and so the film got a staggering amount of attention at Cannes and was bought all over the world.”³⁸ Fitzgerald’s claims here are reinforced by Huston’s having received a standing ovation after the film’s screening at Cannes,³⁹ although Huston’s age and resume surely also boosted the reception. *Wise Blood* was frequently praised for its decidedly un-Hollywood subject matter and the age of its director as much as any specific elements. For example, Frank Rich called it “the most eccentric American movie in years”⁴⁰ and Jack Kroll, in *Newsweek*, described it as “Huston’s 34th film and one of his best,” adding, “to do such work at 73 is the mark of some kind of a heroic figure.”⁴¹ Tim Palleine in *Sight and Sound* called it “the work of an old master but scarcely of an old man”⁴² and David Ansen ended his *Newsweek* review by describing *Wise Blood* as “further confirmation that Huston is still in his prime.”⁴³ Rob Edelman in *Films in Review* labeled it “an eerie, melancholy little film about eerie, melancholy little people,”⁴⁴ using “little” as large praise in an era that had seen the birth of the blockbuster with *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Superman* (1978), and *Rocky II* (1979). The critical resistance to what seemed a new commercialism—and confirmation of what Fitzgerald called the distributors’ “terror” at optioning a film such as this—were reflected in reviews such as Edelman’s, in which he praised Huston as “concerned not with pointlessly splashing millions of dollars across the screen but with exposing his audience to ideas, emotions, human beings and human frailties,”⁴⁵ or the

³⁸ Michael Fitzgerald, “Interview,” *Wise Blood* DVD.

³⁹ Grobel, 715.

⁴⁰ Rich, “The Sound and the Fury,” 50.

⁴¹ Jack Kroll, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *Newsweek*, October 22, 1979, 101.

⁴² Tim Palleine, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *Sight and Sound* (Winter, 1979-80), 57.

⁴³ Ansen, “Huston at His Best,” 101.

⁴⁴ Rob Edelman, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *Films in Review*, January 1980, 115.

headline of a review that read, “‘Wise Blood’ is a low-budget miracle.”⁴⁶ The phenomenon in which a work’s lack of mass appeal bestows other kinds of clout upon it is an idea that, as we shall see, had already surfaced in one of the television treatments of O’Connor in the mid 1960s.

Like many of the novel’s original readers, some critics found themselves unable to describe just what they were seeing or to articulate O’Connor’s thematic concerns. Even the sympathetic Roger Angell, in his generally laudatory review for *The New Yorker*, admitted to being “startled” by his “attachment to a work that may be a broad-scaled holy-picaresque farce, or a Southern-regional historical urban-pastoral, or perhaps a plain metaphysical tragedy.”⁴⁷ (One is reminded here of Polonius struggling to describe the players in *Hamlet*.) Angell’s description recalls the tongue-tied reviewers of the novel, who argued that O’Connor’s “farce gets in the way of her satire and will not support the full implications of her allegory”⁴⁸ or others who simply called the novel “an obscure piece of writing”⁴⁹ and “not a book for casual reading.”⁵⁰ Some of the film’s reviewers were simply inaccurate, resorting to prepackaged phrases and assumptions about the South to help them articulate what had clearly eluded them, as when Archer Winsten, in the *New York Post*, stated, “It’s not easy to think that it can be an enjoyable entertainment, unless you dote on religious fanaticism, fools, and religious mania,”⁵¹ recalling the many critics who offhandedly (and incorrectly) described the novel as a “satire” of

⁴⁵ Ibid., 116.

⁴⁶ Kathleen Carroll, “‘Wise Blood’ is a Low-Budget Miracle,” *New York Daily News*, February 18, 1980, 23.

⁴⁷ Roger Angell, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *The New Yorker*, Feb 25, 1980, 113.

⁴⁸ Joe Lee Davis, “Outraged or Embarrassed,” *Kenyon Review* 15 (Spring 1953), in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 23.

⁴⁹ “Damnation of Man,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 1952, 40, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 11.

⁵⁰ “*Wise Blood* Guarantees to Frighten and Intrigue,” *Wichita Eagle*, August 2, 1962, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 187.

⁵¹ Winsten, “‘Blood’ Repels and Attracts,” 26.

what one critic called “evangelical preachers with banjo quartets, uniforms, concert soloists, and cheap sensationalism.”⁵²

An examination of the film’s reviews reveals that the watchword “grotesque” was still being used to help account for (and sometimes belittle) what baffled or disturbed those asked to take Huston’s film and O’Connor’s characters seriously. Stanley Kauffmann, for example, dismissed the film as too much akin to Huston’s *Night of the Iguana* and *Reflections in a Golden Eye*: “Now it’s Southern grotesque time again, and again Huston has fumbled.”⁵³ Philip French, in the London *Observer*, described the film as “a grotesque collection of Southern gothic characters involved in the ‘religion business.’”⁵⁴ However, one important difference between 1952 and 1980 was that the watchword was not always pejorative. For example, in *The Nation*, Robert Hatch observed, “The film, like the book, is wildly grotesque” but also called it a “triumph,” arguing, “The humor is often grotesque, but we are startled at how often we laugh at this comedy of fanaticism and despair.”⁵⁵ (Hatch also compared Huston’s film to *The Tin Drum*, another adaptation of a work that startled many readers and gave them the kind of “jolt” of which Michael Fitzgerald spoke.) In a glowing review for the *Wall Street Journal*, Joy Gould Boyum described Motes as a “grotesquely comical contradiction” and praised Huston for recreating “the grotesque imagery and internal logic of O’Connor’s phantasmagoric parable.”⁵⁶ David Ansen used the term as wholly complimentary, stating, “*Wise Blood*, a virulently comic, grotesquely unforgettable adaptation of Flannery O’Connor’s celebrated novel of customized redneck

⁵² Melwyn Breen, “Satanic Satire,” *Saturday Night*, July 19, 1952, 2-3, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 18.

⁵³ Stanley Kauffmann, “Unwise Bloods,” *The New Republic*, March 15, 1980, 24.

⁵⁴ Philip French, “In the Bible Belt,” *London Observer*, January 13, 1980, 14.

⁵⁵ Robert Hatch, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *The Nation*, March 8, 1980, 283.

⁵⁶ Joy Gould Boyum, “Two Artists: John Huston and Flannery O’Connor,” 21.

religion and redemption, is as strange and original a movie as Huston has ever made.”⁵⁷ The term had evolved along with critics’ understanding of O’Connor’s art.

Ansen’s phrase “redneck religion,” however, also raises the issue of how critics responded to O’Connor’s Southern roots. Despite Giroux’s efforts in making her an “American” author, many critics still viewed O’Connor as something like a regionalistic reporter and Huston as a man with a hidden camera, offering dispatches from the Sahara of the Bozart. Writing in *New York*, David Denby casually remarked that the film was set in “the familiar, Jesus-haunted South, where a ranting prophet, saint, or con man stands on every corner”⁵⁸—a formula as laden with assumptions about the South as any to be found in the history of O’Connor’s reception. John Simon echoed these assumptions when he, in the same matter-of-fact tone found in many such remarks, stated that the film portrayed “the phenomena that once almost blanketed the South and still lives in many a not-so-isolated pocket.”⁵⁹ Archer Winsten in the *New York Post* declared that Huston’s “amalgam of extreme religiosity, sex, unquestioning belief” presents “a curiously vibrant portrait, one that any student of the South can recognize.”⁶⁰ (Winsten’s desire to mock the hicks interfered with his judgment, for surely Hazel Motes is far from an example of “unquestioning belief.”) Robert Hatch’s review in *The Nation* similarly noted that the cast “looks as if it had tumbled out of the backwoods to run mad through the streets of Macon,”⁶¹ “backwoods” used here as if every reader understood its meaning and what it implied about the characters. Frank Rich praised Huston for making what he assumed was an exposé: “The film’s

⁵⁷ Ansen, “Huston at His Best,” 101.

⁵⁸ David Denby, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *New York*, March 10, 1980, 85.

⁵⁹ John Simon, “Christ Without Christ; Nijinsky Without Nijinsky,” 543.

⁶⁰ Archer Winsten, “‘Blood’ Repels and Attracts,” 26.

⁶¹ Robert Hatch, review of *Wise Blood*, 283.

settings,” he wrote, “are glutted with eclectic religious artifacts and the documentary details of the backwater South.”⁶² Critics spoke of these regions so casually and unquestioningly that one might sarcastically wonder if the “backwater” were near the “backwoods.” Indeed, several important critics wrote as if Huston’s unadorned, straightforward shooting style made *Wise Blood* more documentary than drama. *New West* praised Huston for taking his viewers “into a world we’ve rarely seen on film—the seedy South of obsessed religious evangelists and their pathetic prey,”⁶³ just as a blurb regarding the 1986 video release of the film described it as “centered on the gripping power of Bible Belt fundamentalism.”⁶⁴ Again, preconceptions trumped critical judgment: Motes is far from a “religious evangelist” and the power that grips Motes is precisely the opposite of “fundamentalism.” As for “pathetic prey,” Motes’s and Hawks’s troubles arise from their very *lack* of anyone to gull; theirs are voices to which no one will listen. The London *Observer* spoke as if Huston had reported on-location from what it called “Billy Graham country,” where “religion and guilt pump in the blood”⁶⁵; Robert Asahina in *The New Leader* described Motes’s quest as the natural result of his mailing address, stating that the film depicted “the pathetic attempts” of Motes to “find some comfort in the empty universe of the small-town South.”⁶⁶ *Variety* described the characters as “evangelistic off-shoots” and “overzealous religious preachers from the deep South” (the South mentioned is almost always “deep”) who “run the gamut from the dedicated to the false to the almost

⁶² Frank Rich, “The Sound and the Fury,” 50.

⁶³ Stephen Farber, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *New West*, May 5, 1980.

⁶⁴ Connie Koenenn, “Turn-ons and Turn-offs in Current Home Entertainment Releases,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 15, 1986.

⁶⁵ Philip French, “In the Bible Belt,” 14.

⁶⁶ Robert Asahina, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *The New Leader*, November 5, 1979.

maniacally obsessed.”⁶⁷ Perhaps the most transparently anti-Southern sentiments were found in the *New York Daily News*, where Kathleen Carroll praised Huston for creating a South more like the one she imagined than the one described by O’Connor:

Huston has more than done his part by capturing just right the sleazy Southern atmosphere and recreating the novel’s Bible Belt setting...*Wise Blood* presents a scathing vision of the South as a land of lost souls and religious addicts who are quick to latch on to anyone who even looks like a preacher.⁶⁸

According to O’Connor and her church, the land of lost souls extends far beyond the Mason-Dixon line and the characters she created in *Wise Blood* are far from quick to latch on to anyone who looks like a preacher; part of Motes’s frustration is that his sole disciple is the idiot Enoch Emery. *Wise Blood* is less a scathing vision of a place than of a spiritual condition. But such larger thematic (and even dramatic) concerns were not as important to some critics as seeing exactly what they wanted to see in the film, as if the screen were a means of reflecting back their assumptions about the South and those who lived there. The critical attitudes here call to mind O’Connor’s joke, “Anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.”⁶⁹ In the context of the reception of Huston’s film, her words sound prophetic, as so many critics praised Huston’s “realism.” That Huston shot the film on location and filled minor roles with local players surely added to the “realism” for which he was praised, but the general tenor of the remarks about his vision of Taulkingham suggests that critics were eager to praise as “realism” anything that stroked their imaginary preconceptions about the South, such as when Howard Kissel described Huston’s presentation of O’Connor’s characters with, “They are all, in the great

⁶⁷ Gene Moskowitz, review of *Wise Blood*, *Variety*, June 6, 1979.

⁶⁸ Kathleen Carroll, “‘Wise Blood’ is a Low-Budget Miracle,” 23.

⁶⁹ Flannery O’Connor, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction” in *Mystery and Manners*, 40.

Southern tradition, obsessed”⁷⁰ or when Andrew Sarris noted, “I am not sure that I would want to see a movie that began by bursting out of a Diane Arbus photograph.”⁷¹

Much of the specific praise Huston enjoyed had to do with the degree to which he had successfully appropriated O’Connor’s thematic concerns and artistic performance and how, in the words of one reviewer, “the essence of the book blazes from the film.”⁷² Ironically, in describing a film about a man who seeks to prove the emptiness of religious experience, many critics resorted to religiously-charged language when discussing Huston’s artistic performance. Some spoke of Huston as having created “a remarkably faithful”⁷³ adaptation of the novel, of the “reverent care”⁷⁴ of Huston and his “reverent adaptation,”⁷⁵ of the novel having been “translated with fidelity”⁷⁶ by Benedict Fitzgerald, and of Huston’s having been “remarkably faithful”⁷⁷ to O’Connor’s characters. Kathleen Carroll epitomized this habit of resorting to the language of God to articulate the work of man: “John Huston’s film interpretation of Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* must be considered something of a miracle.”⁷⁸

But what does it mean to call an adaptation “faithful”—and what was so “miraculous” about Huston’s film in terms of how he appropriated O’Connor’s art for a cinematic audience? What led many critics to concur with Rob Baker in the *Soho News*, who called the film so

⁷⁰ Howard Kissel, “Wise Blood,” *Women’s Wear Daily*, February 14, 1980, 20.

⁷¹ Sarris, “Of Blood and Thunder and Despair,” 39.

⁷² Hatch, review of *Wise Blood*, 283.

⁷³ “Nepotism Runs in the Blood,” 9.

⁷⁴ Angell, review of *Wise Blood*, *The New Yorker*, 114.

⁷⁵ Ansen, “Huston at His Best,” 101.

⁷⁶ Farber, review of *Wise Blood*, *New West*, May 5, 1980.

⁷⁷ Andrew Sarris, “Blood Tells,” 40.

⁷⁸ Carroll, ““Wise Blood” is a Low-Budget Miracle,” 23.

“wonderfully true to the spirit and vision of the writer” that “it should serve as a model for similar literary adaptations in the future?”⁷⁹ And, ultimately, how did Huston’s film appropriate O’Connor’s reputation at the time as well as suggest new directions it might take as a wider audience encountered Hazel Motes?

Part of the critical enthusiasm was the result of generally low expectations that accompanied any attempt to adapt imaginative and original literature (as opposed to genre fiction) into film. In her essay included in the Criterion DVD edition of the film, former PEN American president Francine Prose articulates this general assumption about the broken bridges between the library and the movie-house:

Novelists learn not to expect too much when their books are made into movies. Obviously, great fiction has been turned into great cinema, but the dents and scrapes that so many classics have sustained on the rocky road from the page to the screen have convinced most writers that the odds of being purely thrilled by the movies made from their books are only slightly better than the odds of winning big in Las Vegas.⁸⁰

Such an assumption helps to explain the general enthusiasm for Huston’s film, an assumption reflected in the title of Vincent Canby’s second review: “Many Try, But *Wise Blood* Succeeds.”⁸¹ Specifically, however, the critical praise often had to do with matters relating to Huston’s own artistic habit of respecting his source material: unlike other directors of his era, such as Hitchcock or Ford, Huston never sought to improve the works he adapted. In a 1984 interview, he called *Wise Blood* “a wonderful and fascinating book”; when complimented on the striking combination of styles and moods in the film, he replied, “That all comes from Flannery O’Connor. Many writers that we know are sometimes funny, sometimes awful, sometimes

⁷⁹ Rob Baker, “American Gothics,” *The Soho Weekly News*, October 11, 1979, 38.

⁸⁰ Francine Prose, “*Wise Blood*: A Matter of Life and Death,” www.criterion.com/current/posts/1132-wise-blood-a-matter-of-life-and-death, May 11, 2009 (accessed June 12, 2013); also included in supplemental material for the Criterion DVD edition of *Wise Blood*.

⁸¹ Canby, “Many Try, But *Wise Blood* Succeeds,” D19.

strange, but she could be all three at the same time.”⁸² *Wise Blood* worked on film because, despite their widely divergent views on God and religion, Huston and O’Connor possessed similar artistic tendencies. They both had—artistically—wise blood and neither was afraid of presenting strange or unlikable characters *in extremis*, a pattern that Huston would repeat in his next film, *Under the Volcano*. Thus, reviewers such as Howard Kissel mentioned the “unconventional nature of the book” and Huston’s skill in “transferring its obsessions, its wild intensity, to the screen,”⁸³ while another spoke of Huston’s skill in translating O’Connor’s “nuttiness.”⁸⁴ Huston honored the word of *Wise Blood* by never attempting to train it into a conventional film, unlike John Selby who wanted to train it into a conventional novel. He was the kind of reader who could accept O’Connor’s work without needing to contain it—although, as we will see, his original ideas about Motes’s fate underwent a significant shift. Critics called *Wise Blood* “hardly your typical American movie,”⁸⁵ “resembling no other movie that I can recall,”⁸⁶ and “not neat by usual movie standards.”⁸⁷ O’Connor’s unconventionality seemed perfectly suited to Huston’s own, and this element of her reputation was reflected in a *Film Comment* review by James McCourt, who called *Wise Blood* “something like a re-creation of the real Flannery O’Connor’s famous unnatural two-headed chicken, with one real head and one made out of wax and stuck on with crazy glue.”⁸⁸ That the actual backwards-walking chicken

⁸² Michael Ciment, “Two Encounters with John Huston,” in *John Huston: Interviews*, ed. Robert Emmet Long (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001).

⁸³ Kissel, “Wise Blood,” 20.

⁸⁴ Boyum, “Two Artists,” 21.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Angell, review of *Wise Blood*, *The New Yorker*, 113.

⁸⁷ Canby, “Many Try, But *Wise Blood* Succeeds,” D19.

⁸⁸ James McCourt, “Reports from the New York Film Festival,” *Film Comment*, November / December 1979, 64.

could resurface as a mythical two-headed one suggests the degree to which critics had embraced O'Connor's unconventionality as a matter of fact and as a means of accounting for the strangeness of her art.

However, a few critics argued that Huston was not O'Connoresque enough, as when David Sterrit in the *Christian Science Monitor* pointed to the folksy banjo music as an example of how Huston tried to deal in black comedy "but never [got] past light blue."⁸⁹ Others faulted what they saw as the short shrift that Huston gave to the character of Enoch Emery: Geoffrey Nowell-Smith called him "little more than a poor simpleton"⁹⁰ and Robert Asahina argued that the compression of Enoch Emery's scenes in the film "unbalances the narrative."⁹¹ Similarly, in *Sight and Sound*, Tim Palleine argued that "the briefer treatment afforded [Emery] in the movie paradoxically lends his connection to the story a literary overtone."⁹² But these reservations were exceptions to the general praise of Huston's fidelity.

What might strike a reader as surprising in a discussion of how well Huston appropriated O'Connor's novel was that not every critic viewed fidelity to O'Connor's novel as an occasion for praise. While critics such as Michael Tarantino from *Film Quarterly* called *Wise Blood* a success because Huston's treatment of the novel met the "unique"⁹³ demands of the cinema, Stanley Kauffmann expressed his amazement at Fitzgerald's and Huston's thinking that "honoring the word" would result in a successful adaptation: "They thought that (near) fidelity to the story and the dialogue would in itself recreate the book. It doesn't, of course. What we

⁸⁹ David Sterrit, "Missing the Flannery O'Connor Mood," *Christian Science Monitor*, March 7, 1980, 19.

⁹⁰ Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, "Loners and Sin," 102.

⁹¹ Robert Asahina, review of *Wise Blood*, *The New Leader*, November 5, 1979.

⁹² Tim Palleine, review of *Wise Blood*, *Sight and Sound*, 57.

⁹³ Michael Tarantino, review of *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston, *Film Quarterly* 33:4 (Summer, 1980), 17.

get are the data of the book: a chamber of horrors and a mass of unexplained behavior.”⁹⁴ Roger Angell praised Huston for capturing O’Connor’s idiom but faulted him for failing to tackle the larger issues of adaptation: “I wish the Fitzgeralds had sometimes seen fit to invent more dialogue or some business of their own that would give the members of their extremely capable cast a chance to play together in a more useful, interpretive dramatic form, instead of pursuing their lonely lines of scam or vision in such perfect, cuckoo isolation.”⁹⁵ But Angell seemed to be asking for what the novel and film could not—perhaps should not—give. More recently, Jeffrey Meyers, in his 2011 biography of Huston, acknowledged the director’s doggedness but faulted him for even trying to bring *Wise Blood* to the screen:

He did a fair amount of work on the script and, ever faithful to the author, preferred to use her dialogue whenever possible and squeeze every word out of the text. But the final script was too unrelentingly faithful...It succeeded in translating the bizarre and disturbing events of the novel into film, but its episodes of black comedy failed to lighten the bleak tone or mitigate the hero’s absurd tragedy.⁹⁶

This notion that a director can be too faithful a reader—too devoted an acolyte—is one that still informs the ways we think about issues of adaptation. As Alan Yuhas recently stated in a *Guardian* piece about Baz Lurhman’s 2013 adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*:

Countless BBC and PBS adaptations of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens have fallen into the trap of fidelity; they’re well acted, well produced and constantly remind you that you should be reading the original instead. These are literal translations, made leaden by detail—costumes, accents and affectations—full of footnotes for the scholars and superfans.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Stanley Kauffmann, “Unwise Bloods,” 24.

⁹⁵ Angell, review of *Wise Blood*, *The New Yorker*, 114.

⁹⁶ Meyers, 372.

⁹⁷ Alan Yuhas, “As *The Great Gatsby* Opens, What Makes for a Good Adaptation Anyway?” *The Guardian*, May 7, 2013, www.guardian.co.uk (accessed May 22, 2013).

The director may thus seem damned if he does and damned if he doesn't: including all of Enoch Emery's scenes and actions might satisfy those who found his presence in the film too insubstantial, but doing so might have also caused other critics to complain that the scenes detracted from the centrality of Motes's struggles. Thus, critics such as Harold Clurman thought that Huston's film "corresponds to the nature of the writer's work"⁹⁸ while Andrew Sarris used the issue of Huston's fidelity to O'Connor to offer what seems, at best, a tempered compliment:

By most standards, Huston has been remarkably faithful to characters of such emotional, physical, and social grotesqueness that they would have made the old Hollywood moguls choke on their chicken soup and homilies...[But] I am not sure that Flannery O'Connor's vivid gargoyles belong on a movie screen.⁹⁹

This debate over the "proper" degree of cinematic fidelity to literary works has a long history, one early articulation of which is George Bluestone's widely-read 1961 work *Novels Into Film*, in which he argues that the differences between print and film lead not to "translations" or "adaptations," but entirely new works:

The novelist seems perpetually baffled at the exigencies of the new medium. In film criticism, it has always been easy to recognize how a poor film "destroys" a superior novel. What has not been sufficiently recognized is that such destruction is inevitable. In the fullest sense of the word, the filmist becomes not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right.¹⁰⁰

Almost twenty-five years later—after the rise of film studies and literary theory—Joy Gould Boyum argued that the director was less author than—crucially, for our purposes—a reader:

The simple fact is that an adaptation always includes not only a reference to the literary work on which it's based, but also a reading of it—and a reading which will strike us as persuasive and apt or seem to us reductive, even false. And here, I think, we've come to the only meaningful way to speak of a film's "fidelity": in relation to the quality of its implicit interpretation of its source.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Harold Clurman, "New York Film Festival," *The Nation*, October 27, 1979, 409.

⁹⁹ Sarris, "Of Blood and Thunder and Despair," 39.

¹⁰⁰ George Bluestone, *Novels Into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 62.

¹⁰¹ Joy Gould Boyum, *Double Exposure: Fiction Into Film*, 71.

Huston's "implicit interpretation" of O'Connor's novel recalls the previous discussion of her two authorial audiences: the hypothetical "genuine" readers and resistant "ironic" ones whom she imagined as she wrote. How Huston read O'Connor and how critics responded to *his* reading of *Wise Blood* reflect the state of O'Connor's reputation at this time, as well as the ways in which these two audiences we have identified in our examination of *The Violent Bear It Away* were still at odds as they forged O'Connor's reputation.

The specific instance in Huston's film that reflects the continuing and representative split between her genuine and ironic audiences is the climactic event of Motes's blinding himself with quicklime. The genuine reading of such an event holds that Motes, much like Oedipus, punishes himself for his figurative blindness by making himself literally blind and serves a penance for denying the existence of sin (with the prostitute Leora Watts and near-nymphet Sabbath Lily Hawks) through the mortification of his flesh. Motes literally throws money in the trash and plans to spend his remaining days performing his penance, the need for which is beyond the grasp of his pragmatic landlady:

"Mr. Motes," she said that day, when he was in her kitchen eating his dinner, "what do you walk on rocks for?"
 "To pay," he said in a harsh voice.
 "Pay for what?"
 "It don't make any difference for what," he said. "I'm paying."
 "But what have you got to show that you're paying for?" she persisted.
 "Mind your business," he said rudely. "You can't see."¹⁰²

Their conversation about Motes's other form of penance (wrapping barbed wire around his torso) reveals the same opposing attitudes toward the need for redemption:

"What do you do it for?"
 "I'm not clean," he said.

¹⁰² O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 222.

She stood staring at him, unmindful of the broken dishes at her feet. “I know it,” she said after a minute, “you got blood on that night shirt and on the bed. You ought to get you a washwoman...”

“That’s not the kind of clean,” he said.

“There’s only one kind of clean, Mr. Motes,” she muttered.¹⁰³

These exchanges push the reader towards a genuine reading of Motes’s penitential blindness, a reading that O’Connor spoke of in a letter to John Hawkes about how an understanding of the Southern “do-it-yourself religion”¹⁰⁴ helped explain why a man like Motes would engage in such shocking behavior:

There are some of us who have to pay for our faith every step of the way and who have to work out dramatically what it would be like without it and if being without it would be ultimately possible or not. I can’t allow any of my characters, in a novel anyway, to stop in some halfway position. This doubtless comes from a Catholic education and a Catholic sense of history—everything works toward it or away from it, everything is ultimately saved or lost. Haze is saved by virtue of having wise blood; it’s too wise for him to ultimately deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people’s means of grace—they have no sacraments.¹⁰⁵

O’Connor’s art in general reflects this position: characters such as Tarwater, Mrs. Turpin, and the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” experience the action of grace by non-sacramental means and ones equally as unsentimental and shocking as those experienced by Motes. Without sacraments or the Catholic Church, only their own wise blood can move them, however slowly or painfully in their “do-it-yourself” manner, towards salvation.

Many of Huston’s critics did read Motes’s blindness as members of the genuine authorial audience, arguing that, “Haze succumbs to his Christian belief, paying penance for his heresy by committing frightening acts of self-martyrdom,”¹⁰⁶ or informing their readers that Motes “closely

¹⁰³ Ibid., 224. Ellipses in original.

¹⁰⁴ O’Connor to John Hawkes, 13 September, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 349-50.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Boyum, “Two Artists,” 21.

works his way to a pitiable but authentic martyrdom.”¹⁰⁷ Other critics showed evidence of having consulted O’Connor’s works in order to inform their own understanding of the film. Jack Kroll, for example, echoed the ideas and phrasing of O’Connor’s letter to John Hawkes when he stated, “Houston catches the craziness and violence that result when people who lust after grace and redemption have to create their own slapstick sacraments.”¹⁰⁸ And David Ansen described Motes as a “Christian *malgré lui*,”¹⁰⁹ the same term used by O’Connor in her note to the 1962 edition of the novel. More importantly, Ansen called Motes’s self-blinding the “bloody and bizarre atonement” of “a tortured man stumbling ass-backward into salvation.”¹¹⁰ While O’Connor never used such a phrase, one cannot help conjuring the “imagined O’Connor” mentioned earlier and thinking that she would have agreed.

However, other critics regarded Motes’s blindness and suffering ironically, recalling the same split between genuine and ironic audiences that we have seen in our examination of *The Violent Bear It Away*, where some readers assumed, in a genuine authorial spirit, that Tarwater’s vocation was as plain as the marks on the page, while others, from an ironic stance, read the novel as an examination of a young man’s “brainwashing” by a “religious fanatic.” One such ironic reader here was Tim Puleine who, in his enthusiastic review for *Sight and Sound*, described Motes as a man who endeavors to “keep alive his godlessness through (anti-) religious acts of purification,”¹¹¹ as if Motes had blinded himself to illustrate the meaningless of existence and prove that he was willing to suffer for the sake of his Church Without Christ. The novel and

¹⁰⁷ David Denby, review of *Wise Blood*, *New York*, 85.

¹⁰⁸ Jack Kroll, review of *Wise Blood*, *Newsweek*, 101.

¹⁰⁹ Ansen, “Houston at His Best,” 101.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Puleine, review of *Wise Blood*, *Sight and Sound*, 57.

novelist both suggest that he blinds himself for exactly the opposite reason—for decrying the truth of what he had so earnestly mocked, for playing St. Paul before his conversion on the road to Damascus. In another enthusiastic (and British) review, Geoffrey Nowell-Smith described Motes's story as a "seemingly purposeless tragedy."¹¹² Such a claim implies that Motes has learned nothing and has not experienced the grace which is so central to O'Connor's art; however, as was the case with *The Violent Bear It Away*, an ironic reviewer could respond to O'Connor's work in a way wholly antithetical to the spirit in which she intended and yet still find it worthy of praise, as many ironic-minded critics did. The same ironic reading is seen in another British review: in the London *Observer*, Philip French stated, "Eventually, in pursuit of total rejection, Motes blinds himself, practices mortification of the flesh with barbed wire, and attains a kind of sainthood."¹¹³ Motes may attain a kind of sainthood, but not in pursuit of total rejection; what he peruses is total acceptance of what he has spent so much time denying. As with works such as "The River" and *The Violent Bear It Away*, some critics could only approach the fate of the protagonist ironically, perhaps as a means of jeering at O'Connor's issues or, at the very least, revealing their inability to imagine that she could take them as seriously as she did. Late in her *Wall Street Journal* review, the otherwise-genuine Joy Gould Boyum offers what reads like a concession to her ironic colleagues:

In reproducing the book so closely, the film has also reproduced its ambiguities. We cannot be sure just what O'Connor through Huston is telling us here. Is she demonstrating the tenaciousness of belief? Or instead mocking its excesses? How are we to take Haze's martyrdom—as religious distortion, or as embodying the possibility of redemption? As in the book, it's nearly impossible to say.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Nowell-Smith, "Loners and Sin," 102.

¹¹³ French, "In the Bible Belt," 14.

¹¹⁴ Boyum, "Two Artists," 21.

In her study of film adaptation in general, Boyum describes the meaning of Motes's self-blinding and mortification "however one might interpret them—as a grotesque mockery of the excesses of religious faith or as Haze's way to salvation."¹¹⁵ However, for believers in Christ, it is not "impossible to say" what Motes's blindness means or if his blindness suggests he is slouching toward salvation. Few writers were as unambiguous as O'Connor and if one regards Motes's suffering as an occasion for mockery or self-congratulation for never having fallen prey to such "excesses," one seems to have missed the meaning of the title—and while one could argue here that the title itself is ironic, doing so is akin to arguing that Tarwater's vision at the end of *The Violent Bear It Away* is a psychotic hallucination. One would be siding with Rayber rather than Mason, with the secular world rather than O'Connor. In a 2004 interview, Brad Dourif (who played Motes) stated, "He was insane,"¹¹⁶ just as some of the novel's first reviewers, such as Isaac Rosenfeld, proposed, "Motes is just plain crazy."¹¹⁷ But assuming Motes's actions to be the result of insanity rather than grace—and thus approaching *Wise Blood* as an ironic reader—is akin to regarding *Wise Blood* as a work of satire; it is a way to reduce and contain the "terror" that Michael Fitzgerald noted distributors felt when they were asked to release the film. Roger Angell described Motes's blindness as proof that "Jesus has caught him at last,"¹¹⁸ but to allow for such a reading, one must entertain the notion that there is a Jesus from which Motes is running in the first place. Such an allowance may seem obvious to O'Connor or her genuine authorial readers, but it was not so to others, who could only regard the film's climactic moment

¹¹⁵ Boyum, *Double Exposure: Fiction Into Film*, 176.

¹¹⁶ Brett Taylor, "From Cuckoo Patient to Deadwot Doc: An Interview With Brad Dourif," *Shock Cinema*, Fall 2004, 33.

¹¹⁷ Isaac Rosenfeld, "To Win by Default," in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 17.

¹¹⁸ Angell, review of *Wise Blood*, *The New Yorker*, 114.

as ironic or a heavy-handed lesson. In a 2013 interview, Daniel Shor, who played Enoch Emery, articulated such a reading:

I see those characters as people who are seeking belonging. They are clinging onto an obvious illusion. *Wise Blood* was really Flannery O'Connor taking a piss out on evangelicalism of all kinds. Not [on] the people themselves but on the preachers. People need something to believe in, and they'll believe in whatever the hell they're told to believe in.¹¹⁹

Despite Shor's remarkable performance in the film, it is difficult to agree with him here about O'Connor: if Motes is clinging to an "obvious illusion," then the viewer would be meant to take his potential redemption as a joke. The characters also certainly do not "believe in whatever the hell they're told to believe in": Motes denies Christ, Hawks is motivated solely by self-interest, and neither of these rival preachers is able to win any converts other than the idiot Enoch Emery, who seeks companionship more than salvation. Shor assumes an agenda and satire where none exist and speaks of *Wise Blood* as if it were akin to *Elmer Gantry*, a work that does attack "evangelicism of all kinds" and the tendency of people to "believe in whatever the hell they're told to believe in." As we have seen with many reviews of O'Connor's work, some readers resisted genuine readings in favor of ironic ones that offered some sense of superiority over O'Connor's subject matter.

What may be most interesting about the way in which Huston's film reflected these dueling attitudes towards O'Connor was the way in which Huston himself seems to have begun the project as an ironic reader but then found himself changing sides. In a 2004 interview, Brad Dourif said that Huston wanted to adapt the novel because it complemented the director's own opinions: "He saw it as a nihilistic rebellion. He didn't get that it was really an affirmation of Catholicism, of Christianity. Flannery O'Connor was Catholic as the day is long...John was a

¹¹⁹ "Dan Shorr Interview," TV Store Online, <http://blog.tvstoreonline.com/2013/05/actor-dan-shor-talks-with-tv-store.html>, May 29, 2013 (accessed June 10, 2013).

devout atheist.”¹²⁰ Dourif later remarked that Huston, “felt it was about how ridiculous Christianity was”¹²¹ and also described a discussion between him and Huston that reflected the director’s being firmly encamped in the ironic audience:

He thought that, in the end, Hazel Motes had some kind of existential revelation. He was a devout atheist. I mean, he didn’t like religion. And I remember we were in rehearsal and I finally asked the question. I said, “Well, what do you think happens? Because it seems to me that the script is very clearly saying that Hazel Motes finds God and that’s what happened, and he dedicates his life to it.” And he said, “No, no, no, no, no.”¹²²

Benedict Fitzgerald stated that Huston “thought it was a comedy” and that he, his brother, and his mother never attempted to “set right” Huston’s “misunderstandings” about the “religious heart” of the story,¹²³ so pleased were they to have Huston at the helm and so confident that his style of unadorned narrative would allow O’Connor’s issues to surface. However, the screenwriter also told the story of Huston’s experiencing a form of enlightenment lesser than the one experienced by Motes, but important nonetheless:

I remember on the last day he put his hands over my shoulders and leaned in and said, “Ben, I think I’ve been had.” And I didn’t know what he was talking about, but something rang true...And by the end, he realized, “I’ve told another story than the one I thought I was telling. I’ve told Flannery O’Connor’s story.”¹²⁴

Huston’s begrudging shift from the ironic to genuine audience, from denying what informs Motes’s suffering to acknowledging its presence, is reflected even more dramatically in an anecdote Dourif related concerning a conversation among the producers and actors: “We’re all sitting around the table and Huston kind of looks up at everybody and he looks around and says,

¹²⁰ Taylor, “From Cuckoo Patient to Deadwood Doc: An Interview With Brad Dourif,” 33.

¹²¹ Quoted in Grobel, 712.

¹²² Brad Dourif, “Interview,” 2008, *Wise Blood* DVD.

¹²³ Benedict Fitzgerald, “Interview,” 2008, *Wise Blood* DVD.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

‘Jesus wins.’”¹²⁵ Huston was, in some sense, of O’Connor’s party without knowing it, an idea reinforced in Lawrence Grobel’s biography *The Hustons*, where he recounts the making of the film and comments, “*Wise Blood* was so strange, so offbeat, so insular, that John had his own hard time figuring out what it was about.”¹²⁶ *Wise Blood* may have first regarded by Huston—and is undoubtedly still regarded—by some critics as satirical or a mockery of the very values and truths that O’Connor sought to dramatize. Eventually, however, the director seems to have moved closer to the author, who argued in a letter, “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross.”¹²⁷ Motes’s religious awakening does not result in platitudes about loving thy neighbor, but in debasement and an acknowledgement of his own pride—a fate similar to the one experienced by Mr. Head in “The Artificial Nigger” and one that recurs throughout O’Connor’s fiction. William Walsh, writing in the *Flannery O’Connor Bulletin*, cracked that Huston’s epiphany of “Jesus wins” was simply the director “capitulating to the obvious,”¹²⁸ but Huston, like Motes on a smaller scale, took a circuitous route to his insight. Jeffrey Meyers sneers at the film with remarks such as, “The whole Fitzgerald family genuflected at the altar of Saint Flannery...and the movie is a testament to their devotion.”¹²⁹ But if Huston’s *Wise Blood* is a testament to anything, it is to the ways in which O’Connor’s reputation had grown more complex since 1952 and was still being challenged by readers who regarded her work in very different ways. Much had changed: critics seemed, on the whole, more amenable to her issues and the ways that she

¹²⁵ Dourif, “Interview,” *Wise Blood* DVD.

¹²⁶ Grobel, 710.

¹²⁷ O’Connor to Louise Abbot, [undated] Saturday, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 353.

¹²⁸ William Walsh, “Flannery O’Connor, John Huston, and *Wise Blood*: In Search of Taulkinham,” *Flannery O’Connor Review* 9 (2011), 95.

¹²⁹ Meyers, 371.

explored them. But the ironic audience and those who could not get past the actors' accents were still factors in how her work was received.

Elsewhere in this study, we have seen the ways that publishers and their graphic designers attempted to prepare O'Connor's books for public consumption. Those working in the New Line publicity department faced a similar challenge: how to market *Wise Blood* to an audience they correctly assumed would regard it as strange and not worth the price of a ticket. Their strategy was to sell *Wise Blood* as a comedy, something less like a work by Flannery O'Connor and more like one by Mark Twain. The film's poster featured the phrase, "An American Masterpiece!" prominently in its top corner, never suggesting that the "America" in question here is the South (Fig. 21). Indeed, nothing in the poster, except perhaps the small image of Ned Beatty as the guitar-strumming Hoover Shoates, suggests that the film takes place in a fictional Tennessee town. While one blurb calls the film "A brilliant black comedy," the image of the four supporting characters (including Enoch Emery in his gorilla suit) standing on the brim of Motes's hat, combined with blurbs calling the film "An uproarious tale" and "wildly comic," suggest that *Wise Blood* is wacky instead of disturbing, a straightforward comedy rather than one in which nervous laughs are elicited by a growing sense of unease. The phrase, "Based on the novel by Flannery O'Connor" in small type underneath the title reflects New Line's desire promote the film to a literary audience, as well as to a cinematic one.

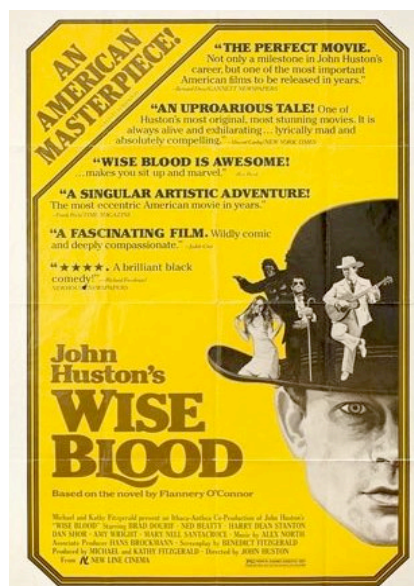


Figure 21

The film's trailer also reflected this desire to recast O'Connor as more humorist than moralist. Beginning with Motes saying, "I ain't no preacher" to a cabdriver, the trailer begins with an announcer advising uninitiated viewers about how to regard the issues of the film:

In a world of sin and seduction, there's a lot of ways of getting saved. Some do it with style. Some have other plans. What Hazel Motes wants is a good car and a fast woman. What he gets is the last thing he wanted. *Wise Blood*. The *New York Times* calls it "an uproarious tale, one of John Huston's most stunning movies." *Wise Blood*. Some got it, some sell it, and some give it away. A new film by John Huston. *Wise Blood*. From the acclaimed novel by Flannery O'Connor.¹³⁰

This voiceover description of the film is intercut with shots and bits of dialogue edited to suggest that *Wise Blood* is more like a lighthearted romp concerning country bumpkins than a disturbing reimagining of the story of St. Paul. The viewer sees Motes nearly hit in the face with the hood of his car, Enoch Emery shaking hands with Gonga the gorilla, the obese Leora Watts cracking, "Mama don't mind if you ain't a preacher—as long as you got four dollars," and what might be

¹³⁰ Trailer for *Wise Blood*, 1980, *Wise Blood* DVD.

the film's one obvious laugh line and certainly the one that led some critics to assume that O'Connor was a satirist:

MOTES: I started my own church. The Church of Truth Without Christ.

LANDLADY: Protestant? Or something foreign?

MOTES: Oh, no, ma'am. It's Protestant.¹³¹

All of these clips are accompanied by jaunty, high-spirited, Southern music. The total effect of the trailer is greatly different from that of the film and the viewer who has seen both might be reminded of Robert Ryang's famous 2006 "trailer" for Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* that recut scenes from the film and added a new voice-over to make it appear like a family-friendly comedy.¹³² In short, the viewer of the trailer for *Wise Blood* is invited to laugh at the characters and feel superior to them, an effect antithetical to what might be called O'Connor's entire "project" of shouting to the hard of hearing and drawing large and startling figures. There is nothing in the trailer or poster to even hint that the film contains a murder, a mock Virgin Mary, or a man who blinds himself. It was assumed that this dark side of O'Connor had to be downplayed to fill theaters. Only then would the distributors' "terror" be lessened. The desire to package Huston's adaptation of O'Connor's novel into more palatable and audience-friendly fare was noted by Vincent Canby, who later commented on his initial review by noting that his enthusiasm colored the way he described it:

It wasn't until I saw the film a second time the other day that I realized that by calling it "comic," "uproarious" and "rollicking," among other things, I had probably misled movie audiences for whom those words are more often associated with Mel Brooks than with a tale about the furious soul-searchings of a young redneck Southerner named Hazel Motes.¹³³

¹³¹ *Wise Blood*, directed by John Huston (1980; Macon, Georgia: The Criterion Collection, 2009), DVD.

¹³² See <http://www.thetrailermash.com/shining-romantic-comedy>.

¹³³ Canby, "Many Try, But 'Wise Blood' Succeeds," D19.

Of course, such an admission was easier for Canby to make than New Line Cinemas, who hawked O'Connor as the author of an "acclaimed novel" that viewers could still find funny. A spiritual dark comedy was not going to sell tickets. One of the reviewers of the novel remarked, "The author calls this 'a comic novel.' It's funny like a case of cancer."¹³⁴ New Line Cinemas had to sell such a case in a package that audiences could easily identify: the misadventures of buffoonish hillbillies.

Almost twenty years before Huston's film, O'Connor wrote Elizabeth Bishop about the nature of her own reputation: "Although I am a Catholic writer, I don't care to get labeled as such in the popular sense of it, as it is then assumed that you have some religious axe to grind."¹³⁵ Her words apply to much of the reception of Huston's film, as when, in his review, David Denby described O'Connor as "a religious writer with a real southern mean streak in her" and warned, "Unless you share O'Connor's moral extremism, and take literally her fables of salvation (and it infuriated her when readers did not), the course of her cruel wit may not be entirely comprehensible."¹³⁶ To Denby and other critics, religious faith was akin to "moral extremism"; his false characterization of O'Connor reveals more about him than her.

O'Connor's letter also applies to Huston, as he was regarded by some critics as having his own agenda to promote about the South or the nature of religious belief. Another letter from O'Connor proves equally illuminating in conjunction with the reception of Huston's film. In 1961, O'Connor had explained the issue at the heart of "A Good Man Is Hard To Find" to an unnamed professor of literature: "The story is a duel of sorts between the Grandmother and her

¹³⁴ George Knight, "A Merited O'Connor Revival," *Tampa Tribune*, September 30, 1962, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 192.

¹³⁵ O'Connor to Elizabeth Bishop, 23 April, 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 391.

¹³⁶ Denby, review of *Wise Blood*, *New York*, 85.

superficial beliefs and the Misfit's more profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action which set the world off balance for him."¹³⁷ The reception of Huston's *Wise Blood*, like that of the novel and O'Connor's other work, has proven to enact a similar duel between superficial, self-congratulating readers who assumed that any work examining religion in the South must be ironic and those whose "profoundly felt involvement" with O'Connor's issues allowed for more genuine readings. The duel continues today. When the film was remastered as part of the Criterion DVD Collection in 2009, a reviewer for the *Los Angeles Times* accurately described Motes as "a fanatic nonbeliever"—a wholly genuine reading—but also raised the possibility of looking at Motes from an ironic vantage point: "But is he a holy fool or just a pathetically deluded one? The religious inclinations of the viewer will determine whether his eventual fate reads as salvation or as tragedy."¹³⁸ That Motes, like O'Connor, would not regard *Wise Blood* as anything like a "tragedy" is beside the point of how O'Connor's great theme of the Christian *malgré lui* was interpreted by the Fitzgerald brothers, Huston, their critics, and their audiences.

Despite the distributor's efforts and the enthusiasm of several important reviewers, *Wise Blood* was not as big a box-office success as some of Huston's other films.¹³⁹ Perhaps O'Connor's characters proved too strange, too possessed, or too "Southern" for mass consumption. In his autobiography, Huston acknowledged the film's financial failure but did so in a way that recalls the articles and reviews that fretted over O'Connor's lack of commercial appeal while recasting this lack of appeal as a mark of artistic integrity: "Nothing would make me happier," he wrote, "than to see this picture gain popular acceptance and turn a profit. It

¹³⁷ O'Connor to a Professor of English, 28 March, 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 437.

¹³⁸ Denis Lim, "Huston's 'Wise Blood' Takes on the New Faith of a Nonbeliever," *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2009.

¹³⁹ Meyers, 372.

would prove something, I'm not sure what...but something."¹⁴⁰ What it would perhaps prove was that O'Connor was ready to be accepted by the great movie-watching public and that her work could be translated into a medium that commonly avoided taking spiritual issues as seriously and as earnestly as she did.

While *Wise Blood* was certainly the most widely-reviewed adaptation of O'Connor's work—and the one that best reflected the complexities of her reputation at the time of its premiere—it was not the only attempt to translate her fiction into another artistic medium. Other adaptations, both before and after Huston's film, reveal similar impulses to bring O'Connor to different audiences and the ways in which she was regarded at the time. In 1963, Cecil Dawkins, then a writer of short stories, wrote O'Connor to pitch the idea of using her work as the basis for a play. The two had been regular correspondents since 1957, when Dawkins first wrote to ask her opinions on literature. Regarding the play, O'Connor replied, "I think it's a fine idea if you want to try it,"¹⁴¹ and expressed more concern over her remuneration than her reputation: "I would not be too squeamish about anything you did to this because I have no interest in the theater for its own sake and all I would care about would be what money, if any, could be got out of it. It's nice to have something you can be completely crass about."¹⁴² However, despite her suggestion that she would keep her hands off of Dawkins' work, O'Connor did note one aspect of her own reputation that she hoped Dawkins would keep in mind:

Did you ever consider *Wise Blood* as a possibility for dramatizing? If the times were different, I would suggest that, but I think it would just be taken for the super-grotesque sub-Carson McCullers sort of thing that I couldn't stand the sound or sight of...The only thing I would positively object to would be to somebody turning one of my colored idiots into a hero. Don't let any fool

¹⁴⁰ Huston, 370.

¹⁴¹ O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 5 November, 1963, in *The Habit of Being*, 546.

¹⁴² O'Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 8 November, 1963, in *The Habit of Being*, 547.

director work that on you. I wouldn't trust any of that bunch farther than I could hurl them. I guess I wouldn't want a Yankee doing this, money or no money.¹⁴³

O'Connor knew how she was regarded and feared that a "Yankee" might attempt to repair her work so it reflected a more Northern sensibility. She had read enough reviews of *The Violent Bear It Away* three years earlier to know that many readers who did not share her assumptions were eager to tell her work what it meant. But she trusted Dawkins and gave her carte blanche.

Dawkins eventually drafted what would become *The Displaced Person*, a play based on several of O'Connor's stories, and hoped to gain O'Connor's approval, but her death in 1964 led Dawkins to shelve the project. In 1965, however, the artistic director of the American Place Theatre asked Dawkins if she was interested in producing the play. The American Place seemed well-suited for Dawkins' work: its first production, Robert Lowell's *The Old Glory* (1964), was an adaptation of works by Melville and Hawthorne, and the Theatre was forging its own reputation as a space for (according to its publicity department) "American writers of stature"¹⁴⁴—a reputation it still enjoys today. The Theatre did its part in drumming up interest among its 4,500 members, informing them that the play's director, Edward Parone, had recently helmed LeRoi Jones's *Dutchman* and was therefore up to the task of creating a memorable production of a controversial work. Dawkins also wrote a three-column piece that ran in the *New York World Journal Tribune* four days before the play's opening date of December 29, 1966, in which she presented her opinions of O'Connor and addressed her current reputation. Dawkins recast O'Connor's Southernness—what O'Connor feared would lead directors into creating a "super-grotesque sub-Carson McCullers sort of thing"—as something akin to the net of nationalism over which, in Joyce's novel, the young Stephen Dedalus seeks to fly:

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Press release for *The Displaced Person*, Archives of The New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Flannery O'Connor, better than any other Southern writer, escaped regionalism. And she did so by escaping the attitude of the region toward itself. Every region has such an attitude. In the South, it is a certain romanticism toward things Southern. An eye such as Flannery O'Connor's is the eye of a naturalist. Like Audubon, she knew her birds.¹⁴⁵

As Robert Giroux would seek to make O'Connor more American than Southern in his 1971 introduction to *The Complete Stories*, Dawkins here and throughout her essay asked readers to forget what they thought they knew about O'Connor as a Southern author and instead to appreciate the "clear-sightedness" that allowed her to measure "things-as-they-are against ultimate values."¹⁴⁶ Dawkins also, however, engaged in her own regionalistic generalizations, stating that the "sophistication" of New York audiences presented the "danger" that works of art became occasion for "an intellectual opinion mill," and that in the big city "performers play to severed heads, to eyes and noses in some direct contact with the brain requiring no nervous system, no spinal column, no body, no blood, no heart."¹⁴⁷ She hoped that *The Displaced Person* would invite intellectual New Yorkers to admire the force of O'Connor's unsentimental work and appreciate how she wrestled with the problem of evil.

They did not. Reviewers were unanimous in their complaints about the play's disjointedness, which, they argued, preserved O'Connor's figures and settings, but not the emotional weight that Dawkins thought she was urging her New York audiences to accept—the same complaint voiced by Stanley Kauffmann against Huston for offering only the "data" of *Wise Blood*. In *The Village Voice*, Michael Smith stated, "Many of the individual characters are

¹⁴⁵ Cecil Dawkins, "Thinking About Evil's Consequences," *New York World Journal Tribune*, December 25, 1966, 26.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

solid and interesting, but the incidents are oddly vague, incomplete, disconnected.”¹⁴⁸ In *Newsweek*, Richard Gilman wrote, “The stage is full of fragments” of O’Connor’s “unique sensibility, an amalgam of dark humor and unavoidable violence, but there is no dramatic shape or growth to the enterprise.”¹⁴⁹ And George Oppenheimer in *Newsday* complained that the actors seemed to be walking “into a series of separate playlets, held together but not firmly enough by a central character.”¹⁵⁰ Oppenheimer also offered a most interesting complaint when viewed in light of Huston’s *Wise Blood*: he called the play “too faithful to Miss O’Connor”¹⁵¹ in terms of what Dawkins attempted to fit into a single work. Despite all the promising similarities between O’Connor and Dawkins—both were Southern Catholic women, both wrote fiction, and both were born in the mid 1920s—the adaptation was a commercial and critical failure. That Huston—an atheist male with no ties to any particular region of the country, born just after the turn of the century—could adapt *Wise Blood* so successfully (aesthetically, if not financially) suggests that the important factor for an adaptation’s success is not gender, geography, or age, but artistic temperament. While Dawkins sought to pack as much O’Connor as she could into her play, even to the point of including the runaway bull from “Greenleaf” (but not its goring Mrs. May), Huston’s method of presenting complex inner activities through straightforward action and images very much reflected O’Connor’s own. In Dawkins’ case, being an O’Connor insider was not enough to increase the reach of O’Connor’s reputation. Even the enthusiastic

¹⁴⁸ Michael Smith, “Theatre: The Displaced Person,” *The Village Voice*, January 5, 1967, 17.

¹⁴⁹ Richard Gilman, “Dark Amalgam,” *Newsweek*, January 9, 1967.

¹⁵⁰ George Oppenheimer, “American Place Theatre Offers, ‘Displaced Person,’” *Newsday*, December 30, 1966.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Robert Giroux wrote to Robert Fitzgerald that both he and Elizabeth Hardwick saw and enjoyed the play, but that “most of the audience thought it was another version of *Tobacco Road*.”¹⁵²

In 2001, Karin Coonrod, who had founded two theatrical companies in New York devoted to reimagining the classics and staging works taken from non-dramatic authors, mounted a production titled *Everything That Rises Must Converge* with the New York Theatre Workshop (Fig. 22). The play was a staged presentation of three stories: “A View of the Woods,” “Greenleaf,” and “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” with eight actors playing all of the roles. Unlike *The Displaced Person*, however, this adaptation featured every word of each story: actors played not only the characters, but the various narrators as well. The fact that Regina would only grant permission with the condition that Coonrod not alter a single word and have every sentence from each story heard aloud forced her to adapt and present the stories in their entirety,¹⁵³ a seeming limitation for an adaptor but one that surely allowed Coonrod to “honor the word” with her creative staging. Her director’s note to the viewer reflects O’Connor’s reputation for combining horror and humor: “Flannery O’Connor’s apocalyptic comedies are peopled with characters whose reality resided in their obstinate wills. They drive themselves at every step deeper and deeper into their own desires, obsessions, disillusionments.”¹⁵⁴ Coonrod also mentioned O’Connor’s narrative voice, noting its tendency to “mock and celebrate and question the characters, attending their every action with a kind of raucous glee.”¹⁵⁵ Such a description contrasts many responses of O’Connor’s first readers, who often sought to pigeonhole her at

¹⁵² Robert Giroux to Robert Fitzgerald, 29 December, 1966. Farrar, Straus and Giroux Archives, NYPL.

¹⁵³ “Director Karin Coonrod Brings Flannery O’Connor Triptych to the Stage,” *Columbia News*, November 16, 2001.

¹⁵⁴ Karin Coonrod, Director’s Note, Program for *Everything That Rises Must Converge*. New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

either extreme of mocking or extolling her characters; the description suggests a more complex understanding of O'Connor's method of presenting her characters objectively in many different, often contradictory, lights. Finally, Coonrod's description helps illuminate the reasons behind her choice of stories, since all three feature characters who initially seem detestable yet who become objects of surprising sympathy. In short, Coonrod understood "how O'Connor works" and sought to replicate her technique on the stage.

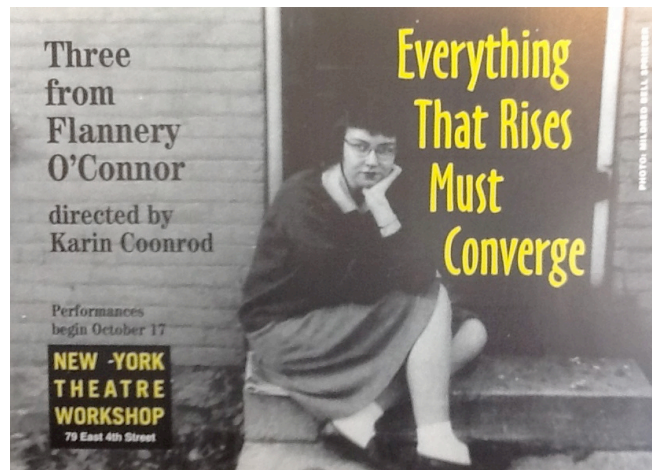


Figure 22

Everything That Rises Must Converge fared much better with critics than *The Displaced Person* had done. It also fared better with audiences, selling out its month-long run.¹⁵⁶ Noting that the production was less "adaptation" than creative staging, Bruce Weber in the *New York Times* called the play a "carefully balanced literary mutation" and—unlike Dawkins' play—"something deftly sewn" together from O'Connor's stories.¹⁵⁷ David Cote, the theatre editor for *Time Out New York*, similarly noted that Coonrod avoided the "literary-adaptation trap" by simply "not adapting." Cote used the phrase "dark, unsettling magic" to describe how the staging of the title story "makes us actually pity this horrible creature," Julian's mother, who "finds the

¹⁵⁶ Susan Srigley, "Flannery O'Connor in the Public Square: Karin Coonrod's *Everything That Rises Must Converge*," *Flannery O'Connor Review* 11 (2013), 99.

¹⁵⁷ Bruce Weber, "Southern Stories, on the Stage and on Their Own," *New York Times*, November 3, 2001, A13.

new South has no place for her genteel condescension,”¹⁵⁸ again attesting to Coonrod’s effective approach—one that O’Connor used throughout her career. In the *Village Voice*, Jessica Winter described the production as an open book whose “pages brim with colorful illustrations.” But she also could not resist what, by now, seemed a tired series of jabs, describing the setting as the “freak-tent medievalist South” and the deaths of the protagonists “swift, near-Falwellian acts of divine justice,”¹⁵⁹ a phrase that both trivializes and misreads the significance of each story’s ending. Coonrod’s efforts suggest that perhaps the best way to translate O’Connor for an audience was to let her speak for herself—or, in the case of other adaptors, sing for herself: a musical of *Wise Blood* premiered in 2011 at the Off Broadway Theater at Yale University and Bryan Beaumont Hayes, a Benedictine monk and former student of Aaron Copeland, composed *Parker’s Back: An Opera in Two Acts*. It remains (perhaps thankfully) unproduced.

O’Connor herself thought very little of her work’s being adapted as a means of reaching a wider audience or examining her chosen themes in different mediums. Her first and only television appearance was in 1955, when she appeared as a guest on *Galley Proof*, an NBC series designed to appeal to a middlebrow audience—or at least an audience of housewives able to tune in on a weekday at 1:30. *Galley Proof* was hosted by Harvey Briet, assistant editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, and combined interviews of authors with dramatizations of their work. The show’s motto, voiced by Briet in the opening minutes, was that “television is a friend, and not an enemy” to books and that *Galley Proof* would be “an amiable union between literature and television.”¹⁶⁰ O’Connor’s appearance coincided with the publication of *A Good Man Is*

¹⁵⁸ David Cote, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, directed by Karin Coonrod, *Time Out New York*, November 18, 2001, 149.

¹⁵⁹ Jessica Winter, “A Doom of One’s Own,” *Village Voice*, November 6, 2001.

¹⁶⁰ “Galley Proof: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*,” in *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*, ed. Rosemary M. Magee (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1987), 5.

Hard to Find and Briet used the occasion to ask O'Connor about her status as a Southern author in an attempt to pigeonhole her in a way she resisted:

BRIET: Do you think...that a Northerner, for example, reading [*Wise Blood*] would have as much appreciation of the people in your book, your stories, as a Southerner?

O'CONNOR: Yes, I think perhaps more, because he at least wouldn't be distracted by the Southern thinking that this was a novel about the South, or a story about the South, which it is not.

BRIET: You don't feel that it is?

O'CONNOR: No.¹⁶¹

Briet changed tactics immediately after O'Connor's refusal, saying, "I don't either," but his line of questioning clearly played upon O'Connor's status as a geographical outsider. Later that year, Briet reported, "She doesn't think of herself as a Southern writer,"¹⁶² offering this tidbit as if it were news—which, to Briet and many of his readers, it was. Significantly, her Catholicism was never mentioned, which seems odd in a discussion of *Wise Blood* but which reflects the times (sectarian religion and television did not yet mix) and that O'Connor's faith was not yet an automatic part of her reputation.

After a few minutes, Briet segued to a dramatization of "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" and inadvertently gave O'Connor the opportunity to state one of her core beliefs about her art:

BRIET: It isn't over. What we're seeing now is only part of the story. Flannery, would you like to tell our audience what happens in that story?

O'CONNOR: No, I certainly would not. I don't think you can paraphrase a story like that. I think there's only one way to tell it and that's the way it is told in the story.¹⁶³

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶² Harvey Briet, "In and Out of Books: Visitor," *New York Times*, June 12, 1955, in *Conversations*, 11.

¹⁶³ "Galley Proof," 8.

Such a remark suggests that O'Connor found adaptation a losing proposition from the start. All the energy devoted to "fidelity" was never enough; in fact, it was the wrong kind of energy. Even paraphrasing a story or "telling what happens"—itself a kind of adaptation—was futile. As O'Connor remarked elsewhere:

When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When anybody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. The meaning of fiction is not abstract meaning but experienced meaning, and the purpose of making statements about the meaning of a story is only to help you to experience that meaning more fully.¹⁶⁴

Such a line of reasoning, however, was not to be used on Briet, who, as *Galley Proof* continued, spoke more than the ostensible subject of his interview.

O'Connor joked about her experience on *Galley Proof* in letters to her friends, stating, "I am sure the only people who look at TV at 1:30 p.m. are children who are not financially able to buy *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*"¹⁶⁵ and, "I keep having a mental picture of my glacial glare being sent out over the nation onto millions of children who are waiting impatiently for *The Batman* to come on."¹⁶⁶ She summarized the experience as "mildly ghastly."¹⁶⁷ Two years later, however, O'Connor sold the rights to "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" to Revue Productions for use as an episode of *Schlitz Playhouse*, one of many television dramas that offered adaptations of literary works to its audience. Her motives here were purely financial: in

¹⁶⁴ O'Connor, "Writing Short Stories," in *Mystery and Manners*, 96.

¹⁶⁵ O'Connor to Catharine Carver, 24 May, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 83.

¹⁶⁶ O'Connor to Robie Macaulay, 18 May, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 82. O'Connor added the article to the television show's title.

¹⁶⁷ O'Connor to Ben Griffith, 8 June, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 84.

her letters, she cracked, “It certainly is a painless way to make money”¹⁶⁸ and spoke with enthusiasm of the refrigerator that selling her story allowed her to buy for herself and her mother: “While they make hash out of my story, she and me will make ice in the new refrigerator.”¹⁶⁹ When O’Connor heard that Gene Kelly would be making his television debut as Mr. Shiftlet, she wrote the Fitzgeralds, “The punishment always fits the crime. They must be making a musical out of it.”¹⁷⁰ Upon learning (from a New York gossip column) that Kelly would be starring in what the columnist called a “backwoods love story,” she wrote Betty Hester, “It will probably be appropriate to smoke a corn cob pipe while watching this,”¹⁷¹ suggesting that she knew all too well how her story would be repackaged and sold as a small-screen version of *Tobacco Road*.

The episode aired on CBS on March 1, 1957 and also starred Agnes Moorehead as the elder Lucynell Crater and Janice Rule as her deaf daughter. O’Connor’s reputation in Milledgeville skyrocketed: she wrote Betty Hester, “The local city fathers think I am a credit now to the community. One old lady said, ‘That was a play that really made me think!’ I didn’t ask her what.”¹⁷² Similarly, she wrote Denver Lindley of the “enthusiastic congratulations from the local citizens,” who “feel that I have arrived at last.”¹⁷³ O’Connor detested the adaptation and knew that the ladies of Milledgeville enjoyed it because the ending had been changed to one more formulaic: in the *Schlitz Playhouse* version, Mr. Shiftlet does not abandon his new bride in

¹⁶⁸ O’Connor to Elizabeth Fenwick Way, 13 September, 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 175.

¹⁶⁹ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 8 September, 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 174.

¹⁷⁰ O’Connor to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, 10 December, 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 186.

¹⁷¹ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 28 December, 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 191.

¹⁷² O’Connor to Betty Hester, 9 March, 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 207.

¹⁷³ O’Connor to Denver Lindley, 6 March, 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 206.

a roadside diner, but instead drives off with her “into a pleasant sunset.”¹⁷⁴ O’Connor sarcastically noted that anyone who enjoyed the television play had not read the story¹⁷⁵ and stated, “The best I can say for it is that conceivably it could have been worse. Just conceivably.”¹⁷⁶ Kelly described the show as “kind of a hillbilly thing in which I play a guy who befriends a deaf mute girl in the hills of Kentucky”; when O’Connor shared this description with her friends Brainard and Frances Cheney, she underlined “befriends” to signal her outrage at the adaptation.¹⁷⁷ A short review in the *New York Times* called the episode “an odd little drama” and described it in language that, in hindsight, suits many of O’Connor’s works: “The peculiarity of the film, ‘The Life You Save,’ stemmed from the extremes it reached during the half hour. For considerable periods it was ludicrous, almost like a caricature. At other moments, it was touching.”¹⁷⁸ In “Writing Short Stories,” O’Connor tells of “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” and says this about the *Schlitz Playhouse*:

Not long ago that story was adapted for a television play, and the adapter, knowing his business, had the tramp have a change of heart and go back and pick up the idiot daughter and the two of the ride away, grinning madly. My aunt believes that the story is complete at last, but I have other sentiments about it—which are not suitable for public utterance. When you write a story, there will always be people who refuse to read the story you have written.¹⁷⁹

O’Connor’s final sentence here could very well stand for the reception of her work from her first publication to Huston’s adaptation of *Wise Blood*: some reviewers refused to read what she had

¹⁷⁴ Gooch, 288.

¹⁷⁵ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 9 March, 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 208.

¹⁷⁶ O’Connor to Mrs. Rumsey Haynes, 3 March, 1957, in *The Habit of Being*, 205.

¹⁷⁷ O’Connor to Brainard and Frances Cheney, 3 January, 1957, in *The Correspondence of Flannery O’Connor and the Brainard Cheneys*, 47.

¹⁷⁸ R.F.S., “Gene Kelly in Debut on ‘Schlitz Playhouse,’” *New York Times*, March 2, 1957.

¹⁷⁹ O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 94-95.

written in terms of how seriously it addressed issues of grace and redemption, just as Huston refused—at first—to read *Wise Blood* as something other than a satire.

In April, 1965, ten years after the *Galley Proof* episode, *Directions '65* devoted an episode to O'Connor's life and work. *Directions '65* was one of many broadcasts sponsored by the National Council of Catholic Men, whose most notable production was *The Catholic Hour*, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen's radio program that brought Catholic apologetics over the airwaves for twenty years. *Directions '65* consisted of narration and commentary on O'Connor's fiction, intercut with excerpts from her work read by actors. The script and voiceover narration were provided by Richard Gilman, at that time the drama critic for *Newsweek*, who had a friendly relationship with O'Connor: she valued his favorable review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* in *Jubilee* and hosted him at Andalusia in 1960. *Directions '65* sought to popularize an author whose admirers felt deserved a greater audience. As the episode's producer wrote to Elizabeth McKee:

I hope you are pleased by our attempt to bring Miss O'Connor's greatness before the American public. If among our several million viewers, we are able to whet the appetites of those who have never had the pleasure of meeting her, so that they will actively search out her work, I think our program will have been successful.¹⁸⁰

Gilman's narration described O'Connor with all of the watchwords and convenient categories that now characterized her reputation: "Flannery O'Connor was a splendid writer, but more than that, a woman, a sufferer, a great heart."¹⁸¹ This tendency to speak of O'Connor in such proscribed terms was noted by Gilman himself four years later in his review of *Mystery and Manners*: "Throughout her life," he wrote, "she was caught in the various pressures of our

¹⁸⁰ F. J. Fontinell to Elizabeth McKee, 22 January, 1965. Farrar, Straus and Giroux Archives, NYPL.

¹⁸¹ Richard Gilman, *Directions '65*, "Flannery O'Connor," television program, National Council of Catholic Men, April 25, 1965.

tendency to classify and sociologize art”¹⁸²—pressures that Gilman revealed in his narration here and when he later in the episode stated that “the two most important facts about her” are that she was Southern and Catholic. Gilman told viewers of his visit to Milledgeville and mused that he left her company “infinitely better stocked with knowledge and insight than from a decade of literary cocktail parties.”¹⁸³ Again, O’Connor’s status as an outsider—this time from the Northern literary establishment—was touted as a virtue, a virtue confirmed by the modest sales figures of her books:

None of her books ever came close to the best-seller list; indeed, outside of literary circles and a small nucleus of Catholic admirers, you will not hear her talked about at all. Her modesty and illness combined to keep her away from the mainstream of self-advertisement; and her beautiful, stern and difficult literary vision was not of the kind that makes for popularity. She wrote, lived, knew pain, and died. And now we possess her legacy.¹⁸⁴

As Huston was praised by some critics for not setting out to create a blockbuster with *Wise Blood*, O’Connor was similarly (and paradoxically) praised for not reaching more readers than she did.

A more successful television adaptation of O’Connor was Horton Foote’s “The Displaced Person.” In the mid 1970s, Foote—whose own reputation had been greatly bolstered by his adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1962—undertook the adaptation for *The American Short Story*, a PBS series that ran for three seasons. Foote later adapted Faulkner’s “Barn Burning” for the same series and wrote about the challenge of adapting the work of similarly singular writers: “The plot and the scenes are usually easy to dramatize but it is the style of the writer, which gives life and breath to the whole, that is the most difficult part to capture. In dramatizing both

¹⁸² Gilman, “On Flannery O’Connor,” *New York Review of Books* 13 (August 21, 1969), 24.

¹⁸³ Gilman, *Directions* ’65.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

Faulkner and O'Connor, that is the challenge."¹⁸⁵ O'Connor scholar Robert Donahoo states that Foote's adaptation is "for most critics the best translation of O'Connor's work onto the screen,"¹⁸⁶ presumably because Foote—a longtime admirer of O'Connor who frequently mentions her as one of his models—approached her work as an absolutely genuine reader. Foote kept O'Connor's story intact, although he confessed to some difficulty with its more ethereal elements: "In *The Displaced Person*, the characters intrigued me most and proved wonderfully comic companions in my stay in the O'Connor country. What often eluded me here were the mystic, visionary aspects of the story, qualities that almost defy dramatization."¹⁸⁷ These "mystic" aspects were also a difficulty acknowledged by O'Connor herself. After being approached by a would-be producer, she shared her concerns with Betty Hester:

Sunday I am to entertain a man who wants to make a movie out of "The River." He has never made a movie before but is convinced "The River" is the dish for him—"a kind of documentary," he said over the telephone. It is sort of disconcerting to think of somebody getting hold of your story and doing something else to it and I doubt if I will be able to see my way through him. But we shall see. How to document the sacrament of Baptism??????¹⁸⁸

What O'Connor does not mention here is that her art rests precisely on this very skill of documenting the most profound moments of grace—of dramatizing what Sophocles called "the encounter of man with more than man."

While the adaptations of O'Connor's works varied in their quality and in their approaches to O'Connor's work, they had in common the effect of furthering O'Connor's reputation until she was regarded as a significant force in American letters. They also reflect the continued rift between genuine and ironic audiences, and remain informed by what became "automatic" and

¹⁸⁵ Horton Foote, *Genesis of An American Playwright* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004), 199.

¹⁸⁶ Robert Donahoo, "A Tribute to Horton Foote 1916-2009," *Flannery O'Connor Review* 7 (2009): 55.

¹⁸⁷ Foote, 183.

¹⁸⁸ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 24 August, 1956, in *The Habit of Being*, 171. Punctuation appears as in original.

unquestioned aspects of her reputation, such as her being a Southern outsider to the literary scene. The adaptations I have examined here are only those that have been reviewed. But others have been made as cinematic short subjects, such as Victor Nunez's adaptation of "A Circle the Fire" (1974), Jeffrey F. Jackson's "Good Country People" (1975), Barbara Noble's "The River" (1976), and Jeri Cain Rossi's "Black Hearts Bleed Red" (1992), an adaptation of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." These minor works have, of course, not reached as many viewers as Huston's *Wise Blood* or the other adaptations examined here, but they do reflect a continued interest in O'Connor—an interest that has grown slowly since 1952 and then more rapidly after O'Connor's death in 1964. As we shall see in the next and concluding chapter, the story of O'Connor's reception and reputation is still evolving online, where the common reader has added a number of tiles to the "total mosaic" of O'Connor's reputation.

CHAPTER 6

O'Connor and the Common (Online) Reader

In 1957, Richard Altick examined the English common reader in order to determine how an emerging “democracy of print”¹ was a joint effort of publishers, editors, authors, and readers. What was true for English readers in the nineteenth century is also true for American ones in the twenty-first, where the web is fostering an even more democratized reception of authors of all genres and audiences. Sites such as Goodreads, Shelfari, and LibraryThing are valuable for a reception study because such sites not only encourage people to use them as online catalogues of what they have read, are reading, and want to read, but also allow readers to post reviews about what they have read and respond to the reviews of other readers as well. The creators of Shelfari, launched in 2006, proclaim, “Our mission is to enhance the experience of reading by connecting readers in meaningful conversations about the published word.”² LibraryThing, also launched in 2006, describes itself as an “an online service to help people catalog their books easily.” Because everyone using the site “catalogs together, LibraryThing also connects people with the same books, comes up with suggestions for what to read next, and so forth.”³ Goodreads, launched in 2007, is described as “a place where you can see what your friends are reading and vice versa” and a reception site that, through the sheer number of reviews and interactions, turns what might be a collection of scattered opinions into a force for democracy:

You can create “bookshelves” to organize what you’ve read (or want to read). You can comment on each other’s reviews. You can find your next favorite

¹ Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, 2nd ed. (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998), 3.

² <http://www.shelfari.com/Shelfari/AboutUs.aspx> (accessed September 8, 2013).

³ <http://www.librarything.com/about> (accessed September 8, 2013).

book. And on this journey with your friends you can explore new territory, gather information, and expand your mind.

Knowledge is power, and power is best shared among readers.⁴

These words from Goodreads co-founder Otis Chandler may seem hyperbolic, but the staggering number of readers who use the site attests to the notion that common readers value Goodreads both as a simple recommendation service and, more importantly for our purposes, as a forum in which they can share their elations and frustrations about what they are reading. What makes the reviews on Goodreads so valuable to anyone interested in literary reputation is that they are so genuine and undoctored. Sometimes these reviews make up in passion what they lack in polish, but they generally and compellingly reveal the immediate, articulate, and forthright reactions of millions of readers who seem more interested in discussing their reading than using their reviews as occasions to advance their own agendas or opinions on matters other than the texts at hand. Mining the raw data of a social reading site such as Goodreads, with over twenty million registered users who have added over five-hundred and seventy million books and posted over twenty-four million reviews over the last seven years,⁵ is obviously useful for any study of a specific author's reception and (literally) up-to-the-minute reputation.

Or so one would think. The current state of affairs suggests that scholars are reluctant to use sites such as Goodreads to examine contemporary reading habits and the reception of individual authors. In 2010, Diana Brydon, the Chair and Director of the Centre for Globalization and Cultural Studies at the University of Manitoba, asked, "What is it about the Web, and social media in particular, that makes some humanists cautious about embracing its

⁴ <http://www.goodreads.com/about/us> (accessed September 8, 2013).

⁵ Ibid. Besides its obvious volume of users, Goodreads is also the most valuable of the leading social reading sites because it accommodates longer reviews.

potential for advancing our research?”⁶ Her answer is that various forms of social media were not created to “advance the work of genuine knowledge creation,”⁷ a true enough charge but one Brydon asks her readers to dismiss on the grounds that sites that track readers’ preferences and profiles can be valuable to scholars. Three years later, Lisa Nakamura urged that “scholars looking to study reading culture ‘in the wild’ will be rewarded by a close study of Goodreads,”⁸ but surprisingly few have taken her advice, perhaps due to snobbery or their disapproval of what they may regard as the corporate takeover of the general reader: Goodreads’ acquisition by Amazon in 2013 was met with some gnashing of teeth over what some viewed as the corporate takeover of a people’s reading lives—the dawn of Big Reading, so to speak.⁹ However, millions of users still turn to Goodreads when they want to find a book or trumpet their opinions about one they have found. Even with the occasional review written by an author’s relative or agent, nowhere on the web is there such a wealth of readers’ opinions of an author, especially one such as O’Connor, whose reviewers can hardly be accused of attempting to affect her sales in either positive or negative ways. Amazon recognizes that “the business model is moving further towards word of mouth”¹⁰ and that social reading sites allow word of mouth to work at a rate and volume unimaginable a generation ago; the presence of Goodreads on Facebook and Twitter adds to the number of times it is seen and used by millions of readers. In a 2012 examination of

⁶ Diana Brydon, “Social Media’s Research Potential,” *English Studies in Canada* 36: 4 (December 2010), 23.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Lisa Nakamura, “‘Words with Friends’: Socially Networked Reading on Goodreads,” *PMLA*, 128: 1 (January, 2013), 241.

⁹ Scott Turow, novelist and President of the Authors Guild, was a vocal critic of the takeover and stated that the acquisition stands as “a textbook example of how modern Internet monopolies can be built.” Scott Turow, “Turow on Amazon/Goodreads: This is how modern monopolies can be built,” March 29, 2013, www.authorsguild.org (accessed September 2, 2013).

¹⁰ Jordan Weissmann, “The Simple Reason Why Goodreads Is So Valuable to Amazon,” *The Atlantic*, April 1, 2013, theatlantic.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

online literary communities, Julian Pinder explains quite succinctly the value of such social reading sites to scholars of reputation history: “The ways in which non-expert groups receive, utilize, and explicate texts—and the patterns of reception, utilization, and explication—themselves provide useful information, particularly when that information supplements rather than replaces existing critical and academic exegesis.”¹¹ In other words, the *vox populi* has something to say.

An investigation of how O’Connor’s work fares on Goodreads reveals the current state of her reputation and the “patterns of reception” created by common readers. The first statistic worth examining is the actual number of ratings her work has received, regardless of whether these ratings were positive, negative, or neutral; by comparing these numbers to those of other notable American titles, we can gage how O’Connor stands in American literary pantheon, relative to other well-known figures. Not every rating on Goodreads is accompanied by a review: some readers simply rate a book by clicking on the number of stars (out of five) they wish to award a title. Perhaps not surprisingly, O’Connor’s *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (her most frequently-rated book) has generated many reviews, but not as many as what are commonly regarded as other, perhaps more canonical American works:

Table 2. Some American titles on Goodreads, with works by O’Connor in boldface

Title	Number of Reviews
<i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i>	1,543,052
<i>The Great Gatsby</i>	1,300,074
<i>The Catcher in the Rye</i>	1,203,538
<i>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</i>	742,122
<i>Slaughterhouse-Five</i>	509,228
<i>The Scarlet Letter</i>	303,875
<i>Moby-Dick</i>	268,597

¹¹ Julian Pinder, “Online Literary Communities: A Case Study of LibraryThing,” in *From Codex to Hypertext: Reading at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Anouk Lang (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2012), 74-75.

<i>The Sun Also Rises</i>	173,035
<i>The Sound and the Fury</i>	81,419
<i>Walden</i>	60,493
<i>Native Son</i>	38,992
<i>The Portrait of a Lady</i>	32,854
<i>Rabbit Run</i>	23,716
<i>Portnoy's Complaint</i>	22,359
<i>O Pioneers</i>	18,020
<i>A Good Man Is Hard to Find</i>	16,874
<i>The Complete Stories</i>	16,674
<i>Wise Blood</i>	10,505
<i>Everything That Rises Must Converge</i>	9,397
<i>Babbitt</i>	9,318
<i>Look Homeward, Angel</i>	5,355
<i>The Violent Bear It Away</i>	4,047
<i>Mystery and Manners</i>	1,502
<i>The Habit of Being</i>	974

Source: Goodreads.com (accessed September 12, 2013).

O'Connor's admirers might wish she had more readers, but can find satisfaction in noting that her *Complete Stories* has been rated almost three times as often as *Tobacco Road* (5,746 ratings).¹² They may also wince at the fact that *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* has been rated more than twice as often (41,380).¹³ However, what these statistics as a whole suggest is that O'Connor has not yet, in these common readers' collective opinion, caught up to the major figures in American literature. Why this is so depends on a number of reasons, such as how often works are assigned in high school or college courses or how a film adaptation can boost the number of ratings a book receives. (*The Great Gatsby* appears on more syllabi than *Wise Blood*, and many more moviegoers have seen Leonardo DiCaprio in his white dinner jacket than Brad Pitt in his black preacher's hat.) In general, the number of O'Connor's reviews confirms

¹² Goodreads, *Tobacco Road* main page, Goodreads.com (accessed September 12, 2013).

¹³ Goodreads, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* main page, Goodreads.com (accessed September 12, 2013).

what any of her admirers would suspect: her audience is large but not as large as the ones for more renown American authors.

A more specific survey of the thousands of Goodreads and, occasionally, other online reviews reveals that some of the watchwords used in print to describe O'Connor have demonstrated remarkable staying power. Not surprisingly, "grotesque" and "Southern gothic" are ubiquitous: examples of their use abound, as when a reviewer of *Wise Blood* casually mentions that "O'Connor's grotesque characters are both inexorably tied to and alienated from their Christianity"¹⁴ or when a reviewer of *The Complete Stories* gushes, "What can be possibly be said about a woman who defines an entire genre of literature: Southern gothic?"¹⁵ Such examples transcend the bounds of readers' ratings: those who both admire and disparage O'Connor's work rely on the same watchwords. These usual suspects abound to the point where online reviewers can refer to them as critical mainstays, as in, "She has been given many sobriquets, 'Southern Writer,' 'Catholic Writer,' 'Early Feminist,' 'Southern Gothic Writer,' etc. She was all these but much more."¹⁶ New watchwords have taken root in O'Connor's reputation, such as "haunting"¹⁷ and "bleak,"¹⁸ both of which appear in hundreds of online reviews of her work. The most frequently-appearing online watchword—"dark"—is found as often on Goodreads as "grotesque" was in newspapers and magazines. Reviewers of *Wise*

¹⁴ Joel, review of *Wise Blood*, September 20, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 1, 2013).

¹⁵ Danielle Wilkie, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 8, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 10, 2013).

¹⁶ Propertius, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 11, 2013, Amazon.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

¹⁷ Richard, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 22, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 2, 2013).

¹⁸ Rebecca Saxon, review of *Three by Flannery O'Connor*, June 29, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

Blood, for example, warn readers, “the novel is dark, dark, dark”¹⁹ and describe it as “one of the most astonishingly funny and dark and emotional American novels,”²⁰ “deliciously dark,”²¹ and a depiction of “a dark world”²² where “dark commingles with beauty”²³ to create “a fascinatingly dark and tremendously profound commentary on original sin.”²⁴ Reviewers also note O’Connor’s “dark sense of humor”²⁵ and describe her tone as “darkly funny.”²⁶ The watchword appears in dozens of reviews of O’Connor’s other works, and even when it does not literally appear, the same idea surfaces in what we might label a “watchthought”: an assumption or judgment about an author shared by many readers to the point where it becomes part of an author’s reputation, a critical “given” which is spoken of as a matter of fact. For example, dozens of online reviewers state that O’Connor is “not for the faint of heart”²⁷ or speak as if they are warning their readers as they simultaneously urge O’Connor’s excellence: “These stories are dark, bitter, angry, and often tragic. But they are a brilliant barometer of the human heart and the depravity of which it is capable when left untouched by divine grace.”²⁸ Many reviewers use figurative language to suggest the same idea and the power they find in O’Connor’s pages. For example, a reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* suggests, “By all means, read this book, but

¹⁹ Lisa Norris, review of *Wise Blood*, May 29, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 1, 2013).

²⁰ Heath Lowrance, review of *Wise Blood*, May 9, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

²¹ Judi, review of *Wise Blood*, May 18, 1911, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

²² Dylan H., review of *Wise Blood*, October 7, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed July 21, 2013).

²³ Larry, review of *Wise Blood*, November 2, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

²⁴ Josh, review of *Wise Blood*, April 5, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

²⁵ A. M., review of *Wise Blood*, October 27, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

²⁶ Emily, review of *Wise Blood*, February 15, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed July 21, 2013).

²⁷ Ricky German, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, October 15, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

²⁸ Richard, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 22, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 10, 2013).

you'll need to clear your palate afterwards,"²⁹ a reviewer of *The Complete Stories* states, "O'Connor is literary 'shock and awe' in the best sense,"³⁰ and one reader compares *Wise Blood* to "passing an accident on the highway."³¹ A reviewer of *The Violent Bear It Away* noted, "This is a book that will take years off your life; it's like going through a trauma"³² and another stated, "When I read the last three paragraphs, I thought the book might burst into flames in my hand."³³ One reviewer of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* compared herself to "the cliffs along some Scottish beach, constantly pounded by cruel dark waves,"³⁴ while another employed even more violent language to articulate her reading experience:

Sometimes Flannery O'Connor feels like a verbally abusive boyfriend that you just keep going back to. You sigh a bit deeper at the end of each tale, feeling a little more defeated by the uglier sides of existence, the weaknesses of human beings, and the general cruelty masked within the humdrum buzzing of life. Her view is grim, you never hope for a Hollywood ending, you sense it building page by page, the inevitable dagger to the gut that will be dealt by the final paragraph, and then that last hit comes at you almost like clockwork. All this, and yet you keep on with her. Why?³⁵

What is worth noting here is that all of the phrases and longer quotations in this paragraph are taken from enthusiastic and positive reviews where the writers rated the book in question four or five stars, the highest rating that Goodreads allows. Such an observation allows us to conclude that one of the reasons why contemporary readers value O'Connor is the very "darkness" they

²⁹ Fussfehlner, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, November 15, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

³⁰ Matt, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 2, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

³¹ Newengland, review of *Wise Blood*, November 2, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 10, 2013).

³² Becky Talbot, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, Feb 23, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

³³ James Stanley, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, July 29, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 10, 2013).

³⁴ Courtney, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, March 5, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 1, 2013).

³⁵ Paquita Maria Sanchez, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, July 26, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

state characterizes her work. One reviewer joked, “Nice Catholic ladies aren’t supposed to demolish you like this,”³⁶ but an examination of the online reviews proves that this “demolition” is very much valued by those who appreciate O’Connor. Even those who do not warm to her themes appreciate this aspect of O’Connor’s work: “I feel completely judged by the author as a writer, a reader, an American, and a Catholic,” one reader of *Mystery and Manners* noted, “But judged so eloquently!”³⁷ O’Connor’s “darkness” and concomitant implications about the fallen state of man have greatly enhanced her online reputation, in terms of both stature and substance, and is often what recommends her to readers.

This is not to say, however, that all readers appreciate the recommendation. Many recognize O’Connor’s work as disturbing and unsettling, but find this to be a fault in her artistic performance. Throughout the online reviews, “unlikable” stands as a watchword when readers describe what they find distasteful about O’Connor’s characters and, by extension, her work in general. One reviewer of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* stated that she “couldn’t find a single redeeming value”³⁸ in any of the characters and many others have voiced similar complaints about the characters in each of O’Connor’s works. For example, one reader of *The Complete Stories* noted that “many of the main characters were just plain mean people” and qualified his remark with, “I don’t have a problem with reading about the ‘dregs of society,’ but this seemed too much for me.”³⁹ One reviewer of *The Violent Bear It Away* described the novel

³⁶ Darwin8u, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, October 29, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

³⁷ Shelia, review of *Mystery and Manners*, April 15, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 10, 2013).

³⁸ Trisha, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, January 12, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

³⁹ Golden, review of *The Complete Stories*, September 30, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

as “peopled with mistreated characters who are generally too unlikeable to be properly pitied.”⁴⁰ Reviews of *Wise Blood* abound with complaints from readers who find Hazel Motes and Enoch Emery simply “too unpleasant,”⁴¹ or “delusional and repulsive.”⁴² As one puzzled reviewer noted, “I know O’Connor had a purpose in writing about redemption but I cannot understand why she chose to select characters of such low achievement and limited horizons as the context in which she would express herself.”⁴³ Such an assumption—that “low” or “limited” characters make for unpleasant reading—runs through dozens upon dozens of online reviews; the total effect is that many readers find that O’Connor’s use of grotesque figures, or what one reviewer called “Southern troglodytes in the grip of religious mania,”⁴⁴ keeps them at arm’s length from any consideration of her themes. Many readers would agree with a reviewer who feels that, in O’Connor’s fiction, “there’s too much morality at stake for us to actually get comfortable with anyone”⁴⁵ and find the apparent gulf between themselves and the characters a hurdle they cannot leap. If a reader complains of being unable to “warm to any of the characters,”⁴⁶ he or she is not about to engage O’Connor on the subjects of grace or redemption. While one reader may joke, “I haven’t met this many unlikeable characters since *Wuthering Heights*”⁴⁷ and another may fume, “Never, in all my reading, have I ever come across an author that despised her

⁴⁰ Jillian, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, December 7, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 2, 2013).

⁴¹ Elliot, review of *Wise Blood*, June 1, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 6, 2013).

⁴² Kat, review of *Wise Blood*, October 12, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

⁴³ Jeffrey Taylor, review of *Wise Blood*, June 23, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

⁴⁴ Charles Weinstein, review of *Wise Blood*, amazon.com, December 16, 2006 (accessed August 9, 2013).

⁴⁵ Dusty Myers, review of *Wise Blood*, January 10, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 12, 2013).

⁴⁶ Fiona Robson, review of *Wise Blood*, January 5, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 1, 2013).

⁴⁷ Sera, review of *Wise Blood*, October 12, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 1, 2013).

characters so deeply,”⁴⁸ the implication is the same: O’Connor’s unlikeable characters damage her reputation among readers who want a less demanding test of their empathy. One reader of *Wise Blood* described the characters as “difficult, if not impossible, to like” and complained, “I couldn’t even find myself rooting for any of them to be successful or escape from their unhappy lives.”⁴⁹ In short, the reader-as-rooter has little use for O’Connor’s grotesques.

This aspect of O’Connor’s reception has been in play since she began her career. In a 1953 letter to Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, she reported that her uncle was “always bringing me a message from somebody at [his company] who has read *Wise Blood*. The last was: ask her why she don’t write about some nice people.”⁵⁰ Of course, many readers would argue that the very unlikability of O’Connor’s characters is the at the center of her technique, one in which she often courts and cultivates the reader’s sense of superiority over the characters as a means of surprising the reader and advancing her thematic concerns and their common condition: once the reader understands that he or she is, in fact, very much like the characters he or she initially despised, such as Mr. Head or Mrs. Turpin, he or she can better appreciate O’Connor’s peculiar dramatizations of grace. Many contemporary readers concede this point, noting the “damaged”⁵¹ and “awful”⁵² people who populate O’Connor’s work, but do not regard this as an artistic liability—quite the opposite. One reviewer thus described herself as “Repulsed by the vile natures exposed” yet “in awe and exhausted by the mastery of the writing,”⁵³ just as another

⁴⁸ Lena, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, December 29, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁴⁹ Christine Stafford, review of *Wise Blood*, March 1, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁵⁰ O’Connor to Robert and Sally Fitzgerald, 25 January, 1953, in *The Habit of Being*, 54.

⁵¹ Mikem, review of *Wise Blood*, June 4, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 19, 2013).

⁵² Mike Lifsey, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, June 12, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁵³ Danielle, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, November 15, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

marveled at O'Connor's "way of making you pity the characters, loving them, and hating them all at the same time."⁵⁴ One reviewer captured the sense of her experience with O'Connor's characters very succinctly: "Her characters are often depicted as dirty, disfigured, morally bankrupt, uneducated and ignorant. In other words, they're real."⁵⁵ How much reality readers can bear seems to depend on what kind of reality they are given: while some might find O'Connor's work simply "too sad to enjoy" and feel that "not even a great writer can redeem such depressing subjects,"⁵⁶ many others find her "train wrecks of stories about the worst in human nature"⁵⁷ engaging and relevant: as one reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* noted, "Every character in this book thinks he or she has found the good man of the book's title, and they all think that they are that man. If that isn't America in a nutshell, I don't know what is."⁵⁸

A second password that appears in hundreds of reviews is "difficult," a word used to describe both the act of reading O'Connor's work and the ability to appreciate her thematic concerns. One reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* stated, "This is the kind of book that makes me wish I were reading it in a great college course instead of alone,"⁵⁹ a sentiment shared by many other readers. Likewise, a reviewer of *The Violent Bear It Away* stated, "I wish I were reading this for a class or book club so that I could engage in some discussion,"⁶⁰ while another

⁵⁴ Jason Alexander, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, February 14, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

⁵⁵ Jenn(ifer), review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 25, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

⁵⁶ Casey Woodworth, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, March 25, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁵⁷ Robin Covington, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 30, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁵⁸ Joseph Walter, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, February 15, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

⁵⁹ Stephanie, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, October 31, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed July 29, 2013).

stated, of the same novel, “It put my brain in a pretzel.”⁶¹ One reviewer of *Wise Blood* called it “definitely not something you can understand in one read,”⁶² while another asserted that O’Connor’s works “are meant to be discussed” and lamented, “I needed a book club for this one.”⁶³ *Wise Blood* is, for many people, “an English-major type read.”⁶⁴ One reader of *The Complete Stories* stated that she could “see why English professors read her”: although she found them “hard to complete,” she added, “the stories do spark the need for conversation.”⁶⁵ Thus, many readers acknowledge O’Connor’s “difficulty” yet find it engaging, as when one reviewer of *Wise Blood* described the novel as “a head-scratcher, but a good head-scratcher”⁶⁶ or another stated, “So strange it makes me dizzy. But in a good way.”⁶⁷ Another reviewer of *Wise Blood* articulated the ways in which some readers find O’Connor’s difficulty invigorating:

What fun this book was! Would I recommend it to most people? No. Its disconnected narrative, strange characters, and focus on the grotesque does not make this read fun...but, if you love to see someone playing with narrative, playing with how characters can function (none of these characters are likeable, relatable or realistic) as tools in a story, or want to spend hours pondering what the hell any of it means, then this is the book for you...This is a smart lady, versed in the best of Russian literature (there are doubles! Mirrors! Even triples!), some serious Rene Girard (scapegoating! mimesis! violence!) and all sorts of fun theory.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Kathryn, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, October 21, 2002, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁶¹ Jo, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, August 1, 2103, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁶² Reese Clark, review of *Wise Blood*, September 11, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

⁶³ Amy, review of *Wise Blood*, June 6, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 21, 2013).

⁶⁴ Anniebranson, review of *Wise Blood*, May 2, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013).

⁶⁵ Rebecca, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 8, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 12, 2013).

⁶⁶ Tan August, review of *Wise Blood*, July 19, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

⁶⁷ Kevin, review of *Wise Blood*, August 3, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

⁶⁸ Jennifer, review of *Wise Blood*, April 28, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

This review reflects the challenge of understanding O'Connor's work mentioned by the previous reviewers, but the additional challenge of facing the philosophical and spiritual implications of her work—a second kind of “difficulty” noted by many contemporary readers. Thus, one reviewer described *Wise Blood* as “a troubling book so rich in its parts and its effect that I will return to it again and again”⁶⁹ and another stated, “So much depth, I’m ready to read it again.”⁷⁰ One reviewer of the novel noted, more colloquially, “O’Connor delivers a lot to chew on, and no convenient spittoon when you’re done.”⁷¹ Unlike *Ulysses*, which is often regarded as “difficult” in the former sense of understanding its narrative, and the Book of Job, often regarded as “difficult” in the latter sense of considering what its narrative implies, O’Connor’s work is regarded as a combination of difficulties that many readers find stimulating, even if they cannot articulate why. One reviewer of *Wise Blood* called it “one of those books I enjoyed without understanding”⁷² while another resorted to a near-confessional tone when describing his reaction: “First, I am ashamed it took me 35 years to read one of her novels. I’m sorry. Second, I am ashamed to say that it might take me 35 years to understand it.”⁷³

Just as online reviews reflect the use of previously-established watchwords and the birth of new ones, they also reflect decades’ worth of conventional wisdom concerning other artists to whom O’Connor might be compared. Faulkner remains, for hundreds of reviewers, the fixed point in the Southern sky and many reviewers assume that stating O’Connor “belongs with the

⁶⁹ Adrian Stumpp, review of *Wise Blood*, October 28, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁷⁰ Tracy Kendall, review of *Wise Blood*, July 18, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁷¹ Sean Deitrick, review of *Wise Blood*, October 3, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁷² Tim Ferreira, review of *Wise Blood*, June 10, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

⁷³ Matt Bianco, review of *Wise Blood*, December 26, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

ranks of Faulkner”⁷⁴ is the highest praise they can bestow. Indeed, she is compared so frequently to him that a reviewer can offhandedly and accurately remark that she is “often spoken of in the same sentence as Faulkner”⁷⁵ and another can brazenly urge his fellow readers, “Put away your Faulkner and start reading O’Connor. The old man should have come and taken lessons from the young woman.”⁷⁶ Carson McCullers, another author to whom O’Connor was often compared in print, appears throughout the online reviews; as with Faulkner, the comparisons have become so automatic that readers have begun to question them, as in, “Why is it that the more I love Flannery the less I love Carson?”⁷⁷ or, conversely, argue that McCullers’ work is “pulsating with more humanity”⁷⁸ than O’Connor’s. One sign of the times is that Erskine Caldwell, to whom O’Connor was once so frequently compared, rarely surfaces in readers’ comparisons. Some reviewers have compared O’Connor to other authors in an attempt to clarify the public perception of her, as when one reviewer noted, “She has more in common with James Ellroy than Harper Lee,”⁷⁹ when another remarked, “She’s certainly no Margaret Mitchell, but that’s a good thing,”⁸⁰ or when another stated, “She has more to do with Poe, Dostoevsky, Aquinas [and] Sophocles than that which is called ‘Southern literature.’”⁸¹ Other names that surface throughout

⁷⁴ Buzz Borders, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 11, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

⁷⁵ Jeff, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 28, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

⁷⁶ Mike, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, April 4, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 1, 2013).

⁷⁷ Hannah Messler, review of Carson McCullers, *The Collected Stories*, March 6, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013). One can imagine O’Connor’s being pleased by such a remark.

⁷⁸ Dominic, review of Carson McCullers, *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories*, January 30, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

⁷⁹ Roby, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 23, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed July 22, 2013).

⁸⁰ C.J. Lipsky, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 24, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

⁸¹ Alan Bajandas, review of *Wise Blood*, July 19, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed July 22, 2013).

online reviews include Kafka, Shakespeare, Nathaniel West, Thomas Hardy, Charles Williams, Cormac McCarthy, and Shirley Jackson, all of which are reasonable and expected comparisons, as when one reviewer compared the sermon of the Lucette Carmody in *The Violent Bear It Away* to those heard in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* or the unlikely Catholic heroes in Graham Greene's fiction to those found in O'Connor's.⁸²

What the web has allowed and fostered, however, is a far wider and more novel array of comparisons than have ever appeared in print; with every reader a potential published critic, a multiplicity of tastes has resulted in some striking and unexpected comparisons, all of which help us better appreciate the current state of O'Connor's reputation and how readers are still attempting to describe her "difficult" art. One reviewer, for example, compared *Wise Blood* to a combination of "the murder ballads of Johnny Cash and the paintings of Jon Langford,"⁸³ while another called O'Connor "a smart woman's Quentin Tarantino."⁸⁴ These comparisons epitomize many of the more striking reviews where O'Connor is compared to non-literary artists, such as songwriters, painters, or film directors. O'Connor's work has been called "very Springsteen-esque,"⁸⁵ "a Brueghel painting of Americana,"⁸⁶ and "the literary equivalent of David Lynch."⁸⁷ Many reviewers have compared her work to the films of the Coen brothers, "for in them we find violence juxtaposed with humor"⁸⁸ and specific films such as *Taxi Driver*, since "each story

⁸² Jenna, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, July 11, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

⁸³ Donovan Foote, review of *Wise Blood*, July 6, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁸⁴ Rebecca Stout, review of *Wise Blood*, January 22, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁸⁵ Caroline, review of *Wise Blood*, November 12, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁸⁶ Dan Karuna, review of *Wise Blood*, March 11, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁸⁷ Steven Taylor, review of *Wise Blood*, September 25, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁸⁸ Arti, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, September 29, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

works as a morality play or parable.”⁸⁹ Such remarks—in which O’Connor’s work is compared to respected works in other genres—seem intended to raise her critical stock among other readers and prod them into reading her work. However, not every comparison is flattering: one reviewer of *Wise Blood* stated, “Reading this book was akin to watching Jerry Springer,”⁹⁰ another stated, “Before there was Jerry Springer, there was Flannery O’Connor,”⁹¹ and a third reviewer compared reading O’Connor’s stories to “watching an episode of the Jerry Springer show minus the chair throwing and fighting.”⁹² While it is easy for a reader to chuckle (or cringe) at such a comparison, the allusion to the worst in daytime television—found in reviews that actually praise O’Connor’s work—reflects the same challenge to come to grips with the freaks of O’Connor’s fiction that, as we have seen, faced her initial reviewers in 1952. The difficulty of doing so helps explain why so many online reviewers speak of O’Connor’s work as if it were a literary Mulligan stew: one described her work as “a mash-up of Catholicism, William Faulkner, and Hieronymus Bosch,”⁹³ another stated that her works read as if “the Grimm brothers and Faulkner got together to rewrite something by F. Scott Fitzgerald,”⁹⁴ while another described her work as what would result if “Kafka did a fusion dance with Cormac McCarthy.”⁹⁵ Still another cracked, “She makes Sylvia Plath look like A. A. Milne.”⁹⁶ All of

⁸⁹ Jasonlylescampbell, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, May 31, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

⁹⁰ Betsy, review of *Wise Blood*, January 12, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹¹ Kevin, review of *Wise Blood*, August 3, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹² Stefani, review of *Wise Blood*, July 15, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹³ Vanessa, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, July 26, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹⁴ Ibtisam Helen, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, September 6, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹⁵ Brett, review of *Wise Blood*, October 23, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

these struggles with allusion and comparison suggest the degree to which the common reader finds O'Connor's work difficult to describe, just as her original reviewers did in 1952 when faced with the challenge of articulating what struck them about *Wise Blood*.

As with the print reviews of O'Connor's work, online reviews are teeming with assumptions—both stated and implied—about the American South. Mencken spoke derisively of the Bible Belt almost eighty years ago, but a survey of Goodreads reveals a still strong anti-Southern bias and the assumption that the South is populated by “porch-dwelling dueling banjo-players”⁹⁷ with all the accompanying unpleasantness that this stereotype connotes. “I haven’t spent much time in the South,” one reviewer of *Wise Blood* states, “and O’Connor’s description of it makes me want to stay away. Far away. Pennsylvania is bad enough.”⁹⁸ Similar vows to never travel below the Mason-Dixon line are found in many reviews of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, as when one reviewer quipped, “I don’t think I will be visiting Georgia any time soon,”⁹⁹ when another reported that the stories will provoke a reader “to make a run for it—probably all the way north, to Canada,”¹⁰⁰ when another praised O’Connor’s ability to “make the South creepier than it already was,”¹⁰¹ or when another described the stories as “really frightening stuff” that “does not make me any more inclined to spend time in the South than I was before.”¹⁰² These sentiments can be found in even more vituperative form, as when one reviewer

⁹⁶ Tim, review of *The Complete Stories*, January 8, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹⁷ Stefani, review of *Wise Blood*, July 9, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹⁸ Jenn(ifer), review of *Wise Blood*, July 2, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

⁹⁹ J. S. Balley, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 29, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰⁰ Rochelle Torke, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, October 2, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰¹ Anna, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 29, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰² Danny, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, February 27, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 19, 2013).

of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* stated, “This collection of stories basically just reminded me of how much I hate the South and how glad I am to be far, far away from it,”¹⁰³ or when another stated that the stories “affirmed how screwed up I know the American South to be,” and added, “Sorry, Southern people. You know it’s true. After all, here is a whole book about it.”¹⁰⁴ These may be the most boldfaced examples, but the assumption that O’Connor’s work reflects what one reviewer called “the essentially savage nature of the American South”¹⁰⁵ runs like a thread throughout the online reviews, regardless of whether the reviewer is praising or attacking O’Connor’s performance. Such an assumption has become so widespread that one reviewer noted, “I still have not read a book where [the] South hasn’t been portrayed as the devil’s pit”¹⁰⁶ and another offered a collective apology: “Folks who live in those states like Alabama and Georgia and Mississippi must get a little tired of everyone thinking they’re freaks.”¹⁰⁷

One of the reasons why so many reviewers respond with such anti-Southern sentiments is that they assume themselves to be without sin and so can cast the first stone. But another reason for these reactions is one we have seen in O’Connor’s early reception in print: the assumption that O’Connor is providing reportage or documentary footage, rather than artistic creations. That such assumed reportage complements some readers’ existing assumptions about the South makes O’Connor’s work seem all the more “realistic.” Recall that the very first print review of *Wise Blood* stated that it was “about the South”¹⁰⁸ and note an early print review of *A Good Man Is*

¹⁰³ Carmen, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, October 25, 2002, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰⁴ Grace Jensen, of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 22, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Joab Jackson, of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, November 10, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰⁶ Jana, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 25, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Paul, review of *Wise Blood*, October 19, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹⁰⁸ “New Creative Writers,” *Library Journal*, February 15, 1952, 354, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 3.

Hard to Find that described the difference between O'Connor and Eudora Welty as akin to the difference between dreams and reality:

Miss Welty deals with a South that almost never was. Miss O'Connor deals with a South that is. Miss Welty's regionalism is like trying to evoke the person of Robert E. Lee from the letters of his name on the letterhead of a school of journalism...Miss O'Connor's regionalism is like bumping into the presence of Robert E. Lee were he now the dean of that school of journalism.¹⁰⁹

This notion that O'Connor's work depicts "a South that is" finds its way into many Goodreads reviews. One reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* asserts, "The writing is factual, dispassionate almost to the point that it reads like a news report,"¹¹⁰ and other reviews reflect a similar assumption, often carried in the verbs used to describe O'Connor's artistic activity. For example, reviewers of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* praise her ability to "capture the darker essence of the South,"¹¹¹ and state that her collection "captures the South in a very realistic way."¹¹² Another praises O'Connor for "showing us the trials and tribulations of life in the South"¹¹³ while another states O'Connor "places the reader squarely in the midst of the mid-twentieth-century South, a place I appreciate visiting but after seeing it through O'Connor's eyes, am most grateful NOT to be staying."¹¹⁴ Such assumptions are also found in reviews of her other works, as when reviewers of *The Complete Stories* state, "If you really want to get a taste

¹⁰⁹ Walter Elder, "That Region," *Kenyon Review* 17 (Autumn 1955), 661-70, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 58.

¹¹⁰ Tim, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, September 15, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹¹ Julie, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, May 7, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹² Steve Abercrombie, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, May 27, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹³ Kate Palley, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, September 15, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹⁴ Lori, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, December 18, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013). Emphasis in original.

of what the deep South is like, read this book,”¹¹⁵ or promise, “Read her and you will know her dark, demented, brilliant truth of the South.”¹¹⁶ One reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* praised O’Connor with, “Nobody does a better job of capturing the realities of life in rural Georgia than Ms. O’Connor”¹¹⁷ and another suggested that “Good Country People” could be used “to explain the South to people who don’t get it,”¹¹⁸ as if O’Connor were more like Eugene Fodor than William Faulkner. Other readers offered similar testimonials: one reviewer stated, “I found a new appreciation for O’Connor when I moved to the South. Before then, I hadn’t believed that characters like the ones she wrote could exist. But they can, and they do!”¹¹⁹ Others offered more complex views of the South, but views still undergirded with the assumption that O’Connor’s power as a realistic, regionalist writer was her strongest suit:

Published over fifty years ago, [*A Good Man Is Hard to Find*] still rings true to me, someone who lives in the rural South today. Don’t get me wrong. Much has changed. But when you get outside the urban areas and the university towns, the themes O’Connor focuses on in these stories (violence, religion, and race) still permeate the culture. Great writing and I highly recommend it.¹²⁰

Such representative examples confirm the degree to which many readers assume that, in the words of one Canadian reviewer, “the South understands what we call surrealism as a type of

¹¹⁵ Dave Hikegrin, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, December 1, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹⁶ Margot, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, August 5, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹⁷ Steven H, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 16, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

¹¹⁸ Annie Schoening, review of *The Complete Stories*, February 4, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹¹⁹ Sara Shepherd, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 11, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

¹²⁰ Mike, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, November 25, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 18, 2013).

hyperreality”¹²¹ or, as one Brooklyn-based reviewer remarked, “The South is a different place.”¹²²

That many readers would incorrectly assume O’Connor’s writing to be aimed at exposing the “real South” and inviting them to cast the first stone from their own positions of innocence was an aspect of her reception of which she was well aware. For example, in a letter to Robert Giroux after the publication of *The Violent Bear It Away*, O’Connor wrote about the British reception of the book:

I’m obliged for the clipping from *TLS*. The only British review I have seen that you haven’t sent me was one by Kingsley Amis in the *Observer*. It was extremely unfavorable but he ended up saying that I had convinced him that this is the way people were in Georgia. (Horrors!)¹²³

In her lecture, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” O’Connor joked about the same topic: “I am always having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs.”¹²⁴ And, of course, there is O’Connor’s oft-quoted remark from the same lecture concerning what passes for “realism” above and below the Mason-Dixon Line: “I have found that anything that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.”¹²⁵ As suggested earlier in other chapters, the peculiar brand of “realism” O’Connor pursued was not a matter of mimesis or the phonetic spelling of characters’

¹²¹ Gena, review of *Wise Blood*, July 24, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013). The reviewer’s profile indicates she lives in Hamilton, Ontario.

¹²² Jeff Golick, review of *Wise Blood*, June 29, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 9, 2013). The reviewer’s profile indicates that he lives in Brooklyn, New York.

¹²³ O’Connor to Robert Giroux, 12 November, 1960, in *Habit of Being*, 417.

¹²⁴ O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” in *Mystery and Manners*, 38.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

speech, but a deeper realism of grace and redemption. “When you’re a Southerner and in pursuit of reality,” she informed Harvey Breit, “the reality you come up with is going to have a southern accent, but that’s just an accent; it’s not the essence of what you’re trying to do.”¹²⁶ O’Connor thought of the South as Joyce thought of Dublin: “I always write about Dublin,” he explained, “because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”¹²⁷ This sense of the South as stand-in for the world has been noted by some online readers, such as reviewers of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* who described the stories as “widely universal,”¹²⁸ “universal in depicting the human condition”¹²⁹ and “a reflection of the greater world outside of the South.”¹³⁰ Similarly, a reviewer of *The Complete Stories* noted, “The setting is the South of the past, but the bigotry and pettiness characterized within these stories is not an affliction that is confined to a time or place.”¹³¹ As we have seen in Chapter 4, such thoughts were exactly what Robert Giroux sought to provoke when he spoke of O’Connor as an “American” author. In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” Tom T. Shiftlet remarks and later demonstrates, “The world is almost rotten,”¹³² and some of O’Connor’s readers recognize that O’Connor’s thematic concerns transcend time and space, just as she intended them to do. However, such an approach is found less frequently than ones that disparage the South as a land of freaks and misfits. When asked in a 1963 interview if

¹²⁶ Harvey Breit, “Galley Proof: *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*,” in *Conversations with Flannery O’Connor*, 8.

¹²⁷ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 557.

¹²⁸ MillCityPress, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 20, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

¹²⁹ Rhonda, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, January 20, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

¹³⁰ Matthew Jankiewicz, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, April 15, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

¹³¹ Regan Sharp, review of *The Complete Stories*, Goodreads.com, April 1, 2011 (accessed August 5, 2013).

¹³² O’Connor, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 53.

the grotesque elements of her work had anything to do with her being a Southerner, O'Connor stated, "We're all grotesque and I don't think the Southerner is any more grotesque than anyone else."¹³³ Many online reviewers, however, would disagree.

While many readers find O'Connor's work to perfectly fit their preconceptions of what a Southerner might produce, they conversely find that her work pleasantly defies what they expect from a writer with an existing reputation as a "Catholic Author." Such readers praise O'Connor for not figuratively preaching to the choir. "You'd think," one reviewer noted, "writing that has such heavy religious imagery would be hard to swallow and uninteresting. Not true."¹³⁴ Other reviewers voice similar sentiments, as in, "Her masterful understanding of the human condition transcends dogma,"¹³⁵ "The stories expose human flaws but do not preach religion,"¹³⁶ and, "Catholic? Sure, but they're universal themes no matter what you believe."¹³⁷ One reviewer of *The Violent Bear It Away* captured very accurately O'Connor's method and its effects:

Flannery O'Connor, with her second novel, again manages to write a story with a strong underpinning of Christian theology without being didactic. This is partly, of course, because her characters are fully imagined and fascinating in their own right. But another reason is that, paradoxically, she is intent on unequivocally putting forth the Christian view of reality, not as a lesson *per se*, but as a condensed version of an experience which makes that view starkly evident.¹³⁸

¹³³ C. Ross Mullins, "Flannery O'Connor: An Interview," *Jubilee* 11 (June, 1963), 32-35. In *Conversations with Flannery O'Connor*, 103.

¹³⁴ Elisabeth Jansen, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, June 2, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹³⁵ Emily, review of review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 14, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹³⁶ Gary Ganong, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 6, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹³⁷ Megan, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 17, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹³⁸ Bruce Marr, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, November 25, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

Some online reviewers find O'Connor's art an antidote to what they regard as trendy, feel-good works about Christianity, as when one praised her stories as "the complete opposite of Christian bookstore fiction"¹³⁹ or another noted that *Mystery and Manners* was "apparently not read by most patrons of the 'Christian' book publishing industry."¹⁴⁰ One reviewer even joked that Kirk Cameron, the former child star who now acts in and produces Christian-based films, should read O'Connor on the flaws of Catholic literature and "take O'Connor's criticisms to heart."¹⁴¹ As some readers value O'Connor's "difficult" vision of humanity—epitomized by her remark, "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it"¹⁴²—others similarly admire her "difficult" and unsentimental view of Christianity. "I am drawn to Flannery's God," one reviewer of *The Complete Stories* explained, "not as a cosmic Santa Claus, as is often portrayed in American Christianity, but as a God who redeems undeserving souls, even if it means the very moment [they] die."¹⁴³

However, other readers—perhaps those of "Christian bookstore fiction" mentioned above—find O'Connor's exploration of Catholic issues too hard to take and too far from the tenets of Christianity as they understand or practice it. "I understand that O'Connor was a devout Catholic," one reader posted, "but what I don't understand is why she always leaves out the part about God's love and forgiveness."¹⁴⁴ One reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* recalls the previously-examined comments about "unlikable" characters when he states, "This

¹³⁹ Nathan, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, September 28, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013).

¹⁴⁰ Jeremy Purves, review of *Mystery and Manners*, April 9, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2103).

¹⁴¹ Lane, review of *Mystery and Manners*, April 9, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 23, 2103).

¹⁴² O'Connor to Betty Hester, 6 September, 1955, in *Habit of Being*, 100.

¹⁴³ Sabina Chen, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 23, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁴⁴ Corrine Wasilewski, review of *The Complete Stories*, February 10, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

was challenging because I knew she was a ‘Christian writer’ and yet it was so filled with despicable characters, violence, and the seamy side of human nature.”¹⁴⁵ Many online reviewers who prefer a more upbeat vision of Christianity express their dislike of O’Connor’s: one warns readers of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, “There is little redemption in these pages”¹⁴⁶ while another simply calls O’Connor “un-Christian” and an author who wasted her talent “in the service of hatred and evil.”¹⁴⁷ This last example may be extreme, but it epitomizes the ways in which some readers find O’Connor’s actual performance at odds with her reputation as a Catholic author: one representative reader gave *The Violent Bear It Away* a three-star rating on the grounds that O’Connor “leaves no room for a quiet, joyful, commonplace Christianity.”¹⁴⁸ Some readers use the same notion of O’Connor’s chief thematic concern to extol or disparage her work: one laudatory reviewer of *The Complete Stories* calls the volume “a must-read if you have Catholic damage,”¹⁴⁹ while another rails, “I get it, Flannery, you have Catholic damage. It’s engulfed your life, it’s all you can think about.”¹⁵⁰ Of course, many readers without any religious convictions can find O’Connor’s work inspiring and moving: one five-star reviewer states, “I can’t explain how much I love these stories. And I’m not even a Christian.”¹⁵¹ The online reviews feature many such statements from non-Christians, agnostics, and atheists who

¹⁴⁵ Pam Newman, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, September 1, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁴⁶ Elaine, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, September 13, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 23, 2013).

¹⁴⁷ Beverly, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, January 29, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 23, 2013).

¹⁴⁸ Skylar Burris, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, August 15, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

¹⁴⁹ Catherine, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 30, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵⁰ Gaby, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 18, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵¹ Ezra Furman, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 14, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

are drawn to O'Connor's work. Generally speaking, however, readers who prefer a kinder, gentler vision of Christianity are not drawn to O'Connor, while those who prefer what they find to be the bitter truth relish O'Connor's ability to explore it. Her current reputation as an unsentimental and troubling Catholic author is found in the opinions of both camps of readers.

One complaint voiced about O'Connor by many online reviewers is the same one found sometimes in print, especially in the original reviews of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*: the narrowness of her subject matter makes for a repetitive reading experience. This is especially true in the online reviews of *The Complete Stories*, where even the most enthusiastic reviewers express opinions such as, "550 pages is too long for a short-story collection in general, but in the end O'Connor's subject matter is rather narrow, and becomes repetitive after a while."¹⁵² One reviewer described how she tried to read the collection "from cover to cover," but "then stopped, because the themes started to get repetitive."¹⁵³ Another reader compared his experience with reading the entire volume to "watching a *Twilight Zone* marathon."¹⁵⁴ Online reviewers of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* have voiced similar complaints, stating that "each story contains an almost identical emotional footprint"¹⁵⁵ and the "same pattern."¹⁵⁶ Many of these reviews—exactly like the ones that originally appeared in 1965—praise O'Connor's skill while simultaneously disparaging what they regard as her limited subject matter. For example, one three-star review states, "I thought the writing was fantastic and I was blown away by the first few stories, although by the end of the book the stories become predictable since she's always

¹⁵² David Hammond, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 23, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵³ Sara Pauff, review of *The Complete Stories*, August 8, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵⁴ Kristi, review of *The Complete Stories*, November 26, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵⁵ Erik Rollwage, review of *The Complete Stories*, February 6, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵⁶ Alicia, review of *The Complete Stories*, March 25, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

working with the same ideas and themes.”¹⁵⁷ In fact, the charge that “it all gets a bit predictable”¹⁵⁸ is often the reason behind online readers’ middling reviews of O’Connor’s collections. The more enthusiastic reviewers offer the suggestion of reading her *Complete Stories* over a long span of time: because of the “certain sameness” of her characters, plots, and themes, many reviewers concur that a reading of the collection “should be spread out over the better part of a year.”¹⁵⁹ One reviewer who admires O’Connor but who found *The Complete Stories* “slightly repetitive, especially when read too close together” explained that he “settled for one story per day, over the course of a month.”¹⁶⁰ These readers argue that when the stories are read successively over a short period of time, “the characters and themes begin to sound repetitious and drown out the nuances of each vignette”¹⁶¹; they are therefore best taken in small doses. However, many less enthusiastic readers suggest a different approach: “Variety is not something you will find here. Individually, some of the stories shine. But when taken together, as a collection must be, O’Connor’s stories end up repeating themselves to the point that you don’t need to read all of them.”¹⁶² (Many of the reviewers with middle-to-low ratings of the *Complete Stories* suggest reading only some of them, assuming that a handful will do the work of the entire collection.) In short, the issue of O’Connor’s artistic limits is treated differently by those who complain that her work features “a few themes, heavily trod, some of which are fairly

¹⁵⁷ Lindsay, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, March 19, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁵⁸ Shane, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 10, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 13, 2013).

¹⁵⁹ Cheeseblab, review of *The Complete Stories*, December 27, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁶⁰ Jacob, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 2, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

¹⁶¹ Eliza Griffith, review of *The Complete Stories*, October 12, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁶² Allen Smith, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 1, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

dated”¹⁶³ or those who find that the quality of her writing makes such complaints moot: “A good friend’s mom once said, ‘But it’s all the same story!’ It’s pretty accurate. One good story, though.”¹⁶⁴

As we have seen, the online reviews reflect their predecessors in print in a number of ways. However, the most striking similarity between these two sets of readers—professional and “common,” during O’Connor’s lifetime and in the present-day—is the way in which they read and misread *The Violent Bear It Away*. The previously-examined skirmish between the genuine authorial audience (who assume Tarwater’s vocation to be undeniable) and ironic audience (who assume Tarwater to be the victim of “brainwashing”) in the reception of this work seems to have reappeared in a new generation of readers, who now battle over the meaning of O’Connor’s novel just as its characters do over Tarwater’s soul. The genuine readers state their opinions with clarity and force, often revealing assumptions similar to those held by Mason Tarwater, the protagonist’s great-uncle whose death launches Tarwater on his spiritual journey. For example, one reviewer states, “What a ride. O’Connor gives us a scalding and brutally honest critique of American progressive thought and utilitarian morality.”¹⁶⁵ Mason is certainly “brutally honest” in his critique of Rayber’s secular humanism, with his notions of how “the world was made for the dead”¹⁶⁶ and the need for Rayber’s son, Bishop, to be baptized. “I love its unabashed attack on reason,” a similarly-minded reviewer states. “Reason can never win with O’Connor, because she correctly recognizes the stupidity and finitude of men who try to use it to answer life’s

¹⁶³ Clark, review of *The Complete Stories*, June 13, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁶⁴ Angie Harmon, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 5, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁶⁵ Mei, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, May 9, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁶⁶ O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 16.

existential questions. They come out looking petty and small.”¹⁶⁷ Such remarks seem like a more polished version of Mason’s invective against his nephew after he is mockingly asked to explain why God formed the mentally-retarded Bishop as He did: “Yours not to question the mind of the Lord God Almighty. Yours not to grind the Lord into your head and spit out a number!”¹⁶⁸ Before his death, Mason tells Tarwater that he kidnapped him away from Rayber so that he would be “free” and “not a piece of information inside [Rayber’s] head.”¹⁶⁹ This struggle between Mason and Rayber, between what one reviewer aptly called “God and the world,”¹⁷⁰ is noted by many readers. One review chosen from many like it reflects the current genuine reading of the novel:

Tarwater travels to the city, where he struggles against the need to deny his spiritual inheritance and the call of God. O’Connor paints a macabre picture of Southern life and religious fundamentalism and parodies the blind self-assurances of modern secular thinking. The novel is unsettling because it offers no easy truths; its hero is an unlikable boy who learns that doing God’s work entails violence, unreason, even madness. It is not, as might be expected, a parody of religious fanaticism, but a psychological study of the mysterious, frightening, and sometimes offensive nature of the religious calling.¹⁷¹

With the phrase “as might be expected,” the reviewer calls attention to the assumptions that many modern readers bring to a novel about a potential prophet whose kidnapping by his great-uncle to be raised in the woods is presented by its author as a boon instead of a curse.

Such expectations of parody abound in the ironic readings of the novel, where many reviewers, including those who praise it, find the novel to be exactly what the previous reviewer

¹⁶⁷ Joe, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, February 5, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ O’Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 34.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷⁰ Diane, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, March 2, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁷¹ Rowland Bismark, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, September 19, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

claimed it is not: a sustained and troubling attack on “religious fanaticism.” In Chapter 2 of this study, print reviewers’ descriptions of Mason as a “fanatic” or “insane” were traced as they surfaced in the original reviews: their online counterparts rely on the same terms to contain and dismiss Mason’s character and mock the issues O’Connor employs him to raise. One online reviewer described the novel as concerning an “orphan raised in the backcountry by a truly insane fundamentalist great-uncle,” a relative who “is so unrelievedly screwed up, so utterly devoid of humanity.”¹⁷² Another complained, “Reading about insane evangelicals does my brain no good,”¹⁷³ while another offered what he saw as a shorthand version of the novel: “Old Tarwater—a religious fanatic; Young Tarwater, brainwashed by Old, & hence, a very stropky surly religious fanatic.”¹⁷⁴ Another summarized the novel as follows: “A boy raised by a crazy, religiously fanatical uncle wanders out of the woods, finds his ‘sane’ uncle, faces some difficulties, and becomes a prophet like his crazy uncle.”¹⁷⁵ That the reviewer mistakenly takes Mason to be Tarwater’s uncle, rather than his great-uncle, is beside the point. What is important here is that the reviewer reflects a common assumption among ironic readers that Mason is insane and Rayber is not, a dichotomy reflected in a review that mocks O’Connor and her characters for their “screwed-up” assumptions:

Here it appears that the lunatics and the radicals are portrayed as being “the ones who get it.” The insane great-uncle (who repeatedly tries to kidnap relatives to baptize them, who shoots people trying to retrieve their own kin, who seems to be

¹⁷² Judy Krueger, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, September 28, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 20, 2013).

¹⁷³ Marissa, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, July 10, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 20, 2013).

¹⁷⁴ Paul Bryant, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, August 21, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 20, 2013).

¹⁷⁵ Ricky Orr, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, September 19, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 20, 2013).

the type from O'Connor's short stories who are the hypocritical and manipulated misled) turns out to be the one who was correct in his ridiculous prophecies.¹⁷⁶

As noted earlier in this study, O'Connor suspected that many of her readers would side with Rayber and dismiss Mason as a lunatic: "The modern reader will identify himself with the schoolteacher, but it is the old man who speaks for me."¹⁷⁷ That so many reviews confirm her view suggests the continuing relevance of her novel and the depth of her insight into the "modern reader's" assumptions.

One interesting and subtle difference between the novel's initial ironic readers and the online ones is their use of a new magic word. Many original reviewers relied on the term "fanatic" to describe Mason, and while the label is still used, it has been complemented by another: "fundamentalist," which can be described as the "new F-word" in the reception of this particular work. One reviewer—who, interestingly, praised the novel—described it as "perfect" and "chilling for the modern reader who nurses a healthy fear of religious fundamentalism."¹⁷⁸ Another reviewer (a self-described "uneducated atheist") called the novel an "incredible portrait of three generations ruined by religious fundamentalism. Scary as hell. Each man deals with his 'burden' in different ways, and each one in turn gains nothing."¹⁷⁹ The quotations here around "burden" are as ironic as this reviewer's entire approach. These reviews are typical of the many that urge *The Violent Bear It Away* as a warning against the dangers of fundamentalism, just as, we shall see, others regard O'Connor's stories as parables intended to instruct the reader about

¹⁷⁶ Ryan, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, October 10, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁷⁷ O'Connor to John Hawkes, 13 September, 1959, in *The Habit of Being*, 350. On the subject of how readers react to Rayber and Mason, a student of mine once remarked, "It's funny how readers will automatically question Mason but never Rayber. Perhaps O'Connor should have drawn even larger and more startling figures."

¹⁷⁸ Andrew Warsinske, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, February 7, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁷⁹ Charlaralotte, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, March 13, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

racism. This desire to regard the novel as a warning against what the reviewer finds to be a threat to his or her own assumptions about the ways of God is found, sometimes subtly, in many reviews:

No book better explains what happens when we raise children who hear the Scriptures out of context every day, and yet are far from God's Church and a community of godly saints. Flannery O'Connor helps us, in this crude novel, see the consequence is soul-less children who are hungry and thirsty but never satisfied, who understand not humor, nor joy, nor tears.¹⁸⁰

Others argue that, in terms of the battle between Mason and Rayber, O'Connor finds both of them troubling: "For O'Connor, both secularism and fundamentalism are equally heresy, and blind their adherents to God's truth. There is a place for both, just as there is a place for both reason and faith. Each exposes the weaknesses of the other."¹⁸¹ This seems typical of the reviewer who wants O'Connor to conform to his or her own assumptions, as one who describes the novel as a "tale of both religious and secular fanaticism and the violence they engender."¹⁸² Of course, such claims that both Mason and Rayber are "fanatics" reduce the characters' complexities and misread O'Connor's chief thematic concern, which one reader accurately states as imagining "what it would be like to be a prophet in modern America."¹⁸³ And, in a perfect example of a reader unable to believe that O'Connor took her spiritual issues as seriously as she did, one notable reviewer—who gave the novel a five-star review—epitomized O'Connor's ironic reception:

Children are the ultimate victims of adults who are consumed with self-interest. Young Tarwater's life is essentially stolen by Old Tarwater from the beginning of

¹⁸⁰ Becky Pilego, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, June 4, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁸¹ Paul Hinman, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, March 14, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁸² Erick Nordenson, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, June 18, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁸³ Diane, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, March 2, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

the book. And then we see Young Tarwater navigate a life after Old Tarwater's death, haunted and weighted with the mission and shame Old Tarwater decided for him...I found this book the perfect example of what happens when a person disappears into religion, essentially "Jesus" erasing the personality and uniqueness of a person. Of Old Tarwater: "He was a one-notion man. Jesus. Jesus this and Jesus that." The boy struggles to differentiate, and a voice within him specifies what his choice in life is: "It ain't Jesus or the devil. It's Jesus or you."¹⁸⁴

This is the greatest example I know in the history of O'Connor's reception of what might be called an enthusiastic misreading: what the reviewer has not grasped is that the twice-quoted "voice within" Tarwater is not his conscience or imaginary friend, but the devil, who leads Tarwater away from his vocation and is eventually personified by the man in the lavender-colored car who drugs and rapes Tarwater after he simultaneously drowns and baptizes Bishop. That this reader would fall for the Devil's line and defend it in the name of children is a perfect example of O'Connor's insight: there could perhaps be no better example of O'Connor's skill in making what another reviewer calls "humankind's most dangerous adversary"¹⁸⁵ sound reasonable and "modern." Such reviews that extol O'Connor's novel, while finding in its pages issues and ideas that are directly opposed to the ones she painted in such "large and startling figures,"¹⁸⁶ suggests the degree to which O'Connor was able to capture the tone of her times (and ours) and how some readers seem unable to imagine that a twentieth-century novelist could entertain any approach to Southern Christianity other than scorn.

Key words such as "grotesque," the idea of O'Connor's work as stylistically and thematically "difficult," her unsentimental vision of Catholicism, her artistic "limitations," and her portrayal of the South are all aspects of her reputation that we have traced since the

¹⁸⁴ Melissa, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, December 12, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁸⁵ Judy Eh, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, August 1, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

¹⁸⁶ O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *Mystery and Manners*, 34.

publication of *Wise Blood* in 1952 and which resurface in contemporary online reviews, where the common reader has come to many of the same conclusions as the professional readers of a generation or two before them. What sets contemporary online reviewers most apart from their predecessors in print, however, is the attention they pay to O'Connor's depiction of race and racial issues, a subject occasionally mentioned in print but which is found throughout the online reviews. Many reviewers warn prospective readers about this topic just as they do about the "darkness" of the stories, especially when they are praising O'Connor's work. For example, one laudatory review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* begins:

A word of caution before you read her work. Her stories were written in the forties and early fifties and take place in the Deep South. Language is used to refer to African-Americans that is considered unacceptable today. In my reading, it did not appear that the characters used the word in a derogatory manner, but more like an adjective. As if the word were a substitute for "black." It's the reader's call as to what is offensive and what is not. If you are able to overcome it, you will be rewarded with some entertaining stories and a look into the past.¹⁸⁷

Another reviewer ended her positive review of *The Complete Stories* with, "I recommend this compilation, but don't expect *Gone with the Wind* sensibilities and niceties. This is the raw South of the late 40s and the 50s. Proceed with caution."¹⁸⁸ Another simply noted, "Not for the easily offended."¹⁸⁹ Online reviewers seem able to find examples of this feature of the "raw South" in virtually every page of O'Connor's work: one warns readers to "Prepare for endless use of the 'n' word,"¹⁹⁰ while another describes the word as "everywhere"¹⁹¹ in O'Connor's fiction. A reviewer on Amazon states, "Anyone who is upset by the use of the 'N' word, beware. Ms.

¹⁸⁷ Michael Tucker, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, June 11, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁸⁸ C. J. Lipsky, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 24, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁸⁹ Kaylee, review of *The Complete Stories*, August 15, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁹⁰ Matt Middlebrook, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 26, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 2, 2013).

¹⁹¹ Larry Bassett, review of *The Complete Stories*, November 19, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 2, 2013).

O'Connor [*sic*] uses it repeatedly in almost every single story in this book,"¹⁹² a remark as expected as it is untrue. Others speak of the "rampant racism"¹⁹³ found in O'Connor's work and exaggerate the degree to which O'Connor explored racial issues: one reviewer of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* writes that the stories "focus primarily on racial tensions of the time"¹⁹⁴ and another erroneously describes her stories as "overwhelmingly concerned with race relations."¹⁹⁵ Such exaggerations can be found throughout the online reviews; what emerges from the positive reviews that mention O'Connor's treatment of race is an almost-palpable nervousness felt by reviewers who wish to suggest the quality of O'Connor's work but perhaps fear that they will be labeled "racists" for doing so. Hence, the volume of the warnings and caveats that appear in so many positive reviews and the mischaracterization of O'Connor's work as focused on racial themes. While such themes are found in a small number of stories, they are more symptoms of the characters' failings than the disease: "The Artificial Nigger" demonstrates Mr. Head's racism to be part of his spiritually-fatal pride and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" suggests that Julian's "enlightened" attitude toward African Americans is, in many ways, more pernicious and damnable than his mother's nostalgia for the Jim Crow past. O'Connor herself stated, "The topical is poison. I got away with it in 'Everything That Rises' but only because I say a plague on everybody's house as far as the race business goes."¹⁹⁶ The "race" with which O'Connor was truly concerned was the human one, but this does not always

¹⁹² E. Cook, review of *The Complete Stories*, November 11, 2010, Amazon.com (accessed August 14, 2013).

¹⁹³ Stephen Hyter, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 5, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁹⁴ Joy Lesknick, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, August 6, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁹⁵ Ed, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, August 21, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

¹⁹⁶ O'Connor to Betty Hester, 1 September, 1963, in *The Habit of Being*, 537.

become apparent in the online reviews, where O'Connor's use of racially-charged language and interest in racial themes are both exaggerated because they seem more glaring to contemporary readers, a phenomenon that has also occurred with the most famous American literary powder keg, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.¹⁹⁷ Her works have not changed but her audiences have.

On this topic, one finds that online reviewers who discuss O'Connor's treatment of racial themes can be grouped into three broad categories. The first of these includes readers who assume that O'Connor was a product of her time and that her putting the n-word in her characters' mouths was simply *de rigueur* for a Southern author in the 1950s. This category of readers who address O'Connor's treatment of race assume that she does so because any writer about the South would, by virtue of the task, be forced to create racist characters—an assumption directly related to the ones about the South explored earlier and those reviewers who assume that O'Connor's work is akin to documentary footage or reportage. For example, a reviewer of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* notes, “She is, to some degree, a product of her environment, and her use of certain words can grate on our 21st-century ears,”¹⁹⁸ while another discusses his inability to determine if O'Connor was “racially progressive for her time or merely mired in her context.”¹⁹⁹ A reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* called it “a good depiction of the south in this era” and, as if what followed was necessary in any such evaluation, gave “fair

¹⁹⁷ As mentioned in my introduction, in *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain*, Peter Messent notes that the novel's reception has changed over time and explains that, upon its release in 1885, American readers were upset not because of Twain's treatment of race but because he supposedly glorified juvenile delinquency. See Messent, *The Cambridge Introduction to Mark Twain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12-14.

¹⁹⁸ Ellen, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, June 25, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

¹⁹⁹ Ryan Wolf, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, November 8, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

warning” of the “racist terminology used.”²⁰⁰ A second reviewer of the same collection notes that since the stories “were written in the 1940s (pre-Civil rights), some of the language is a bit hard to take.”²⁰¹ This reviewer’s dating of the stories is as faulty as her assumption about O’Connor as benighted by her times, an assumption shared by other readers, who note that O’Connor’s “racial themes” could be “very shocking and offensive, especially when read out of social context and era”²⁰² or who complain of O’Connor’s “repeated racial overtones” but assume that such overtones were “in the grasp of her every-day”²⁰³ experience. These kind of reviewers, who assume that O’Connor was a prisoner to what they assume was generic Southern racism, often engage in self-congratulation, as when a reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* states that one value of the stories is “to see how wrong our ancestors were, and to see how far we’ve come, and to think about how far we still have to go”²⁰⁴ or when a reviewer of *Everything That Rises Must Converge* wonders “if we should blame the era or the miserable characters”²⁰⁵ for their attitudes about race. One reader reflects a common maneuver found in many reviews, when he qualifies his mentioning the use of “extremely repulsive” racial slurs with, “In her defense, this was in character for a white southerner of that era.”²⁰⁶ These remarks and others

²⁰⁰ Cullen, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, April 17, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 2, 2013).

²⁰¹ Melissa, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 21, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

²⁰² Lisa N, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, December 31, 2010, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

²⁰³ David, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, July 1, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 2, 2013).

²⁰⁴ Karolyn Sherwood, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, April 1, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

²⁰⁵ Tracy Nicolaysen, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, February 10, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 3, 2013).

²⁰⁶ Smith Nickerson, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, April 12, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

recall the exchange in “The Life You Save May Be Your Own” between Mr. Shiftlet and Lucynell Crater:

“Why, listen, lady,” he said with a grin of delight, “the monks of old slept in their coffins!”
 “They wasn’t as advanced as we are,” the old woman said.²⁰⁷

Like the old woman, many modern readers assume a superiority to the very author whom they praise; that the author specialized in cutting down just such superior-minded figures (such as Mrs. Turpin and Mr. Head) escapes their notice. As with readers of *The Violent Bear It Away* being of the devil’s party without knowing it, again we find readers unknowingly proving the validity of O’Connor’s themes and how accurately she captures human flaws and hypocrisies. Not all readers, however, find themselves casting a patronizing eye on O’Connor for being trapped in her time and place: one reviewer pointedly remarked that she found it “hard to be self-satisfied and judgmental when reading a book of stories of people who are self-satisfied and judgmental.”²⁰⁸

The second category of reviewers who address O’Connor’s treatment of race assume that she is offering a specific critique or attack, seeking to expose what she found to be a malignant force in Southern life. These readers regard O’Connor as more like Swift or Orwell than Faulkner or Welty. For example, one reviewer praises O’Connor with, “Her criticism of her southern characters is blatantly open, calling out stupidity and racism.”²⁰⁹ Another states, “There is a ton of racism in many of her characters, but I think O’Connor was trying to point that out to

²⁰⁷ O’Connor, “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 57.

²⁰⁸ Karen, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, July 14, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 7, 2013).

²⁰⁹ Becky, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, April 8, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

readers, especially in the fifties.”²¹⁰ One reader values O’Connor’s stories as “a snapshot of the appalling state of race relations in this country in the 1950s,”²¹¹ just as another regards them as works in which O’Connor gives “a pointed sizing up of her peers in the segregationist south of the 1950s.”²¹² As with “the South,” so with “the Fifties”—a cultural idea to which many people claim unbiased insight. Reviewers of *The Complete Stories* praise O’Connor for uncovering what they (like so many others) assume about Southern life: one states “Here, hate is exposed as tragic,”²¹³ while a second states, “O’Connor has a lot to say about how religion and racism shaped the Southern culture in the early twentieth century.”²¹⁴ That O’Connor was never interested in “exposing” or editorializing (“a lot to say”) is a notion that this camp of readers seldom entertains. A subcategory of this group of reviewers includes those who assume that O’Connor used the plots of her stories to instruct her readers, much like a Southern Aesop. For example, in a review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, one reader describes the unease he feels because of the “racial slurs” which “abound” in the collection but ends his review on a note of reassurance:

I couldn’t tell you too much about O’Connor’s views on Southern racism; I haven’t read enough of her personal writings to make a sound call there. I can tell you that the characters who display their investment in social hierarchies, the benefits of slave or underpaid labor, or in their own glory in a general sense are invariably punished.²¹⁵

²¹⁰ C, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, December 17, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 6, 2013).

²¹¹ Lily Brent, of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, October 3, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 6, 2013).

²¹² Amber, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, December 31, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 4, 2013).

²¹³ Alexis Quinian, review of *The Complete Stories*, January 23, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 7, 2013).

²¹⁴ Valerie, review of *The Complete Stories*, May 21, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²¹⁵ Jamie, review of *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, August 13, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 3, 2013).

Such “punishment” is meant to assuage potentially offended readers but also to place O’Connor on the right side of history. In such reviews that present O’Connor as moral instructor, we see an obvious example of reputation-steering, for if she were as much of a racist as some of her characters, such reviewers could never recommend her, at least in a public forum such as Goodreads. A similar instance is found in a review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, when the reviewer asks, “Where else can you find prophetic grandmas, artificial leg fiends, and old racist ladies who get their comeuppance?”²¹⁶ Like the previous reviewer (and others), this person assumes that O’Connor’s works are meant to foil the racism they find so disquieting, but what they fail to grasp is that, to O’Connor, the people they describe as “deserving” punishment for their ignorance are of every place and every time. The Misfit’s famous eulogy of the grandmother—“She would have been a good woman if it was someone there to shoot her every minute of her life”²¹⁷—applies to everyone in all times. A good man is hard to find. As some of her early readers assumed that she was satirizing religion, many modern readers assume—incorrectly, for O’Connor was neither satirist nor saint—she is doing the same with attitudes about race.

Finally, those in the third broad category of reviewers assume that O’Connor was simply a racist herself. Such reviews appear less frequently than those which assume O’Connor to be a journalist or writer of fables, but they do surface enough to be noticed, often in negative reviews. For example, one reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* stated, “Flannery O’Connor’s racism is about as subtle as an atomic bomb,”²¹⁸ while another dismissed the collection as “dismal,

²¹⁶ Sarah Walker, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 7, 2007, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²¹⁷ O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, 22.

²¹⁸ Chrissy, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, April 4, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

religious, Southern racist material,”²¹⁹ as if O’Connor were writing propaganda for the Klan. Even some reviewers who admire her work assume that O’Connor is guilty as charged: one reader of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* added in his four-star review, “It seems to me that O’Connor is a racist and a gleeful dogmatist, but those things make her true to her region and time, and they don’t detract from the quality of her work.”²²⁰ Again, we find the assumption that the South and racism are indissolubly linked; the idea here, as we have seen elsewhere, is that O’Connor simply could not help herself. (Such an assumption resulted in the 2000 banning of O’Connor’s work from—of all places—a Catholic high school in Louisiana.²²¹) That a great number of reviewers exaggerate the degree to which O’Connor’s characters employ racist language in realistic stories as they simultaneously attempt to defend her use of it suggests the degree to which they feel uncomfortable recommending her to other readers for fear of being called racists themselves.

To summarize, the reviews posted on Goodreads suggest that O’Connor’s stock among readers has continued to rise: most of her over 71,00 ratings and over 4,600 reviews are four- or five-star; her average rating, out of a perfect 5, is 4.22.²²² The general sense among those who admire her work and recommend her to other readers is that her spiritual and concerns are less important than the force of her prose—a surprising aspect of her reputation as a Catholic author. “I couldn’t disagree more with her politics,” one representative reader states, “but absolutely

²¹⁹ Martha, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, August 27, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²²⁰ Northpapers, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 25, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²²¹ See J. Bottum, “Flannery O’Connor Banned,” *Crisis* 18: 9 (October, 2000), 48-49.

²²² “Flannery O’Connor,” Goodreads.com (accessed October 6, 2013).

love her as a writer.”²²³ Many readers admire her for what they perceive to be a shared set of values: one reviewer of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, for example, notes that O’Connor’s characters “want their heaven a little early, but can’t quite understand why their dreams aren’t what their God promised them. As in modern society, we have deposed God for not getting with our program.”²²⁴ Also worth noting is that the reviews generally stress character and content much more than form: the general reader seems, at least in O’Connor’s case, to prize traditional storytelling more than inventive narrative technique. And just as we have seen O’Connor’s original print reviewers struggle to describe the content and effects of her fiction, many reviewers have expressed their inability to articulate their own admiration for her work: “Why am I fascinated with Flannery O’Connor’s stories?” one reviewer asked. “She was a devout Catholic living in the Southern bible belt. I’m a lapsed Jewish yankee. Nearly all of her stories have explicit religious themes. I’m an atheist.”²²⁵ Another reviewer asked, “Seeing as I have no fear of the wrath of an angry god, why did this book affect me so deeply, leaving me with a stunned expression staring at a blank wall for several minutes after each little story had wrapped up?”²²⁶ Another reviewer noted that she loved *Wise Blood* “even if I may never be able to articulate why.”²²⁷ Perhaps reviewers such as these could benefit from the idea that O’Connor could be regarded less as a Southern Milton, justifying the ways of God to men, than as a stylist, an author whom many reviewers have cited as their informal instructor in the art of writing

²²³ Steven Salaita, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 2, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

²²⁴ Rhonda, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, January 20, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 11, 2013).

²²⁵ Marc Goldstein, review of *The Violent Bear It Away*, March 20, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²²⁶ Paquita Maria Sanchez, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, January 13, 2001, Goodreads.com (accessed August 31, 2013).

²²⁷ Dara, review of *Wise Blood*, June 24, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

fiction.²²⁸ As one reviewer notes, “I get that she’s labeled a Catholic writer, but it would be a mistake to read her as such in a simplistic or superficial manner.”²²⁹ How online readers have read her work and described its effects can be found in a five-star review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* that Goodreads posts as the first one shown to potential readers:

This stuff is twisted, sparse, clipped, dark, doomy, funny, dramatic, Southern, angry, sexy, super Catholic, death-haunted, maniacal, bizarre, possibly racist, apparently desperate, fatalistic, existential, dreary, ugly, fetid, frenzied, morbid, lax, stern, prepossessing, unforgiving, unrelenting, anti-everything, aged, “retro,” haunting, parabolic, anecdotal, moral, redemptive, sublime, reasoned, feverish, dreamlike, unsparing, sparse, I said that one already, seductive, craftsmanlike, worried, extremely well conceived, taut, brooding, polarizing, scary, and powerful.²³⁰

This playful yet earnest review reflects the trends, watchwords, and contradictory readings of O’Connor that still inform her reputation.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, O’Connor’s early death has played a part in her online reputation, just as it did the pages of *Esprit* and the reviews of her posthumously-released work. Several reviewers rely on her illness as an explanation for O’Connor’s art, regarding her (as one reviewer did) as “a delicate Southern Catholic who lived a third of her life ravaged by lupus” and “certainly acquainted with pain.”²³¹ Reviews of *The Habit of Being* address her lack of self-pity

²²⁸ One representative reviewer noted, “I returned to these short stories after many years, along with others—Chekhov, Hemingway, Faulkner, Cheever, Carver—I read in college when I was probably too young to appreciate them, in order to learn the craft of telling stories well.” Mark Johnson, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 19, 2013, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013). Another noted that O’Connor taught her “everything I know and believe about writing.” Mary, review of *The Complete Stories*, July 27, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 22, 2013). A third stated, regarding *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, “Every writing student should read this collection.” Miriam, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, July 25, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013). These are some of the many online reviews that suggest that reading O’Connor is akin to a good MFA program.

²²⁹ Sergio Zamora, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, November 30, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

²³⁰ Matt Hanson, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, February 12, 2008, Goodreads.com (accessed August 17, 2013).

²³¹ Daniel, review of *The Complete Stories*, February 28, 2012, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

in similarly admiring tones: “There’s something about this woman’s humor and vision in the face of her illness that is so strengthening”²³² and, “Her disability is treated as a slightly humorous inconvenience, when in reality it must have been heartbreaking”²³³ are representative examples of how O’Connor’s death has been made part of her reputation among readers who admire her character as much as her fiction. In words of which O’Connor herself would most likely approve, readers admire the personality behind the work: “She was a real character, in all the best senses of that word. And she had no patience with b.s.”²³⁴ The reputation fashioning of her editors, colleagues, and friends had not been not done in vain.

In his *Life of Gray*, Samuel Johnson describes “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” as one of those works that is actually as good as it is often claimed to be: “In the character of his *Elegy*,” Johnson states, “I rejoice to concur with the common reader; for by the common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices, after all the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning, must be finally decided all claim to poetical honours.”²³⁵ Johnson may have elsewhere expressed a desire to “smile with the wise and feed with the rich,”²³⁶ but in the case of Gray, he sided with the common reader’s judgment. Johnson’s sentiments here apply to this examination of O’Connor’s reception: outside of the academy and the pages of leading periodicals and without “the refinements of subtlety and the dogmatism of learning”—in other words, without any motives to publish one’s findings or parrot trendy, scholarly terms of art—

²³² Francisco, review of *The Habit of Being*, April 2, 2102, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013). The review begins with the sentence, “This is probably the third time I’ve read this book.”

²³³ Gail, review of *The Habit of Being*, February 19, 2009, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²³⁴ Lisa Roney, review of *The Habit of Being*, September 23, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed August 24, 2013).

²³⁵ Samuel Johnson, *The Life of Gray*, in *Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952), 446.

²³⁶ Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 408.

the common readers have awarded their “honours” to O’Connor.

CONCLUSION

An early scene in *The Violent Bear It Away* concerns Mason Tarwater's discovery that his nephew, Rayber, had invited him to live in his house under false pretenses: "He had lived for three months in the nephew's house on what he had thought at the time was Charity but what he said he had found out was not Charity or anything like it."¹ Rayber, Mason learns, was actually using his uncle as the unknowing subject of a psychological case study about what some of O'Connor's critics might term "religious fanaticism." Mason's reaction when he discovers this deception raises an issue that runs throughout the novel: the attempts of Rayber to confine and control what he cannot master. After Rayber hands his uncle a copy of the magazine in which the study was published and suggests that the old man "glance over it," Mason sits at Rayber's kitchen table and reads the article until he understands its true subject:

About the middle of it, old Tarwater had begun to think that he was reading about someone he had once known or at least someone he had dreamed about, for the figure was strangely familiar. "This fixation of being called by the Lord had its origin in insecurity. He needed the assurance of a call and so he called himself," he read. The schoolteacher kept passing by the door, passing and repassing, and finally he came in and sat down quietly on the other side of the small metal table. When the old man looked up, the schoolteacher smiled. It was a very slight smile, the slightest that would do for any occasion. The old man knew from the smile who it was he had been reading about.

For the length of a minute, he could not move. He felt that he was tied hand and foot inside the schoolteacher's head, a space as bare and neat as the cell in the asylum, and was shrinking, drying up to fit it. His eyeballs swerved from side to side as if he were pinned in a straight jacket again. Jonah, Ezekiel, Daniel, he was at that moment all of them—the swallowed, the lowered, the enclosed.²

With previous attempts to literally confine Mason in an asylum proven unsuccessful, Rayber has now attempted to place his uncle in another kind of cell, an action against which the old man rails for the rest of his days. "Where he wanted me," he later tells Tarwater, "was inside that

¹ O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 4.

² Ibid., 75-76.

schoolteacher magazine. He thought that once he got me in there, I'd be as good as inside his head and be done for and that would be that, that would be the end of it."³ Mason's insight is acute: Rayber, the expert on testing at the school at which he works, mocks the existence of anything he cannot quantify and has dedicated his life, like Hazel Motes, to resisting the urgings of his own wise blood. He can only deride what he is not strong enough to deny. Even the "horrifying love"⁴ he feels for his own son must be contained—hence his cold-blooded attempt to drown Bishop.

Many readers involved in the formation of O'Connor's reputation share with Rayber a method of confining what strikes them as strange and powerful—in their case, O'Connor's fiction—to a neat space in which she and her work could be brought to heel. "Southern Gothic," "Grotesque," "Difficult," "Woman Author," "Catholic Novelist," and even "Racist" are all cells into which readers have attempted to commit O'Connor. As she herself remarked, "Even if there are no genuine schools in American letters today, there is always some critic who has just invented one and is ready to put you into it."⁵ The desire to categorically confine in order to dismiss, to do to O'Connor what Rayber tried to do to Mason, has been prompted by a number of motives and reactions, ranging from befuddlement to disbelief in the tenets that inform O'Connor's fiction. As we have seen in chapter 1 with the initial publication of *Wise Blood*, to label O'Connor a "satirist" of religion or as an author offering a "realistic" picture of the South is a way to avoid the implications of her treating her thematic concerns as seriously as she did; as we have seen in chapter 6, to label her work as "racist" is a way to assume an easy superiority over a writer who, as Ralph C. Wood has noted, is "offensive" more because she forces readers

³ Ibid., 20.

⁴ Ibid., 113.

⁵ O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," in *Mystery and Manners*, 37.

to consider how “the Gospels become a snare and a stumbling block”⁶ than because of any unpleasant or offensive language used by some of her characters.

Attempts to control and fix O’Connor’s art through the confines of labels are found throughout the history of her reception, regardless of whether readers have admired or detested her work. Such attempts are an aspect of authorship which frustrated O’Connor as she sought a wider audience. An examination of how she regarded the phrase “Catholic author” when used to describe her reveals O’Connor’s unease with the reductive power of reputation shorthand. In a 1960 letter to Betty Hester, she stated, “I am very much aware of how hard you have to try to escape labels” and described a reporter who interviewed her for *Time* magazine:

He wanted me to characterize myself so he would have something to write down. Are you a Southern writer? What kind of Catholic are you? etc. I asked him what kind of Catholics there were. Liberal or conservative, says he. All I did for an hour was stammer and stutter and all night I was awake answering his questions with the necessary qualifications and reservations.⁷

Later that year, she wrote to Elizabeth Bishop, “Although I am a Catholic writer, I don’t care to get labeled as such in the popular sense of it, as it is then assumed that you have some religious axe to grind.”⁸ A year later, she wrote to John Hawkes that “one of the great disadvantages of being known as a Catholic writer is that no one thinks you can lift the pen without trying to show somebody redeemed.”⁹ The inability of many readers to discard easy labels—to break O’Connor out of reputation confinement—continued to vex her: in a 1962 letter to Cecil Dawkins, she stated, “I must be seen as a writer and not just a Catholic writer, and I wish somebody would do

⁶ Ralph C. Wood, “Reading Flannery,” *National Review Online*, March 25, 2009 (accessed September 6, 2013). Wood has elsewhere examined this issue in greater detail. See, “The Problem of the Color Line: Race and Religion in Flannery O’Connor’s South” in *Flannery O’Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 93-120.

⁷ O’Connor to Betty Hester, 13 February 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 374.

⁸ O’Connor to Elizabeth Bishop, 23 April, 1960, in *The Habit of Being*, 391.

⁹ O’Connor to John Hawkes, 3 March, 1961, in *The Habit of Being*, 434.

it.”¹⁰ And in a 1969 profile for the *New York Review of Books*, Richard Gilman recounted a conversation he had with O’Connor about this very topic: “If she disliked being known as a Southern writer, it wasn’t because she thought there was any loss or injury in being one—quite the contrary—but for the same reason she didn’t want to be called a Catholic writer: it was reductive, misleading.”¹¹ O’Connor understood that such labels, used automatically and without pause, were confining rather than illuminating. Before her 1955 appearance on *Galley-Proof*, O’Connor wrote to Robie Macauley, “Everyone who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I’m a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression that I’m a hillbilly Thomist.”¹² That O’Connor could joke about labels this early in her career suggests the degree to which they had already taken root in her reputation—something we have seen in our survey of her reception since *Wise Blood*, which initial critics described as what might be called a “hillbilly nihilist’s” examination of “the loss of hope in today’s world,”¹³ and “the Kafkian village removed to the American South.”¹⁴ A later remark from one of her letters concerning *The Violent Bear It Away*—“I suppose my novel too will be called another Southern Gothic. I have an idiot in it”¹⁵—suggests that such confining labels had retained their power to irk O’Connor throughout her career.

As we have seen, much of the history of O’Connor’s reception and the formation of her reputation has been marked by a tension between those who wished to confine her and those who

¹⁰ O’Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 26 January, 1962, in *The Habit of Being*, 463.

¹¹ Richard Gilman, “On Flannery O’Connor,” *New York Review of Books* 13 (August 21, 1969), 24-26, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 395.

¹² O’Connor to Robie Macauley, 18 May, 1955, in *The Habit of Being*, 81.

¹³ “Damnation of Man,” *Savannah Morning News*, May 25, 1952, 40, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 11.

¹⁴ R. W. B. Lewis, “Eccentrics’ Pilgrimage,” *Hudson Review* 6 (Spring 1953), 144-50, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 25.

¹⁵ O’Connor to Cecil Dawkins, 26 October, 1958, in *The Habit of Being*, 301.

had no use for reductive labels. As mentioned in chapter 4, John Selby, O'Connor's first editor at Rinehart, sought to force the square peg of *Wise Blood* into the round hole of the conventional novel. Even the tone of his first letter to O'Connor—which she described as appropriate for addressing “a slightly dim-witted Camp Fire girl”¹⁶—revealed a desire to contain O'Connor's strange art to make it more marketable. Selby thought that *Wise Blood* needed to speak to more readers in a more accessible manner; its problem, he wrote O'Connor, was that it was drawn from the “small world of your own experience.”¹⁷ If O'Connor wanted to land more readers, she would need to cast a wider net. Her reply to Selby is prophetic in how it anticipates the tensions described throughout this study that marked her career:

I only hope that in the finished novel the direction will be clearer, but I can tell you that I would not like at all to work with you as do other writers on your list. I feel that whatever virtues the novel may have are very much concerned with the limitations you mention.¹⁸

Selby wanted the kind of novel that O'Connor was not willing to write: a pattern repeated throughout her career. Some readers, including O'Connor's mother, wanted her to produce more genteel, Margaret-Mitchell-type fare. Some wanted O'Connor's Catholic concerns expressed in a more upbeat (and less violent) manner. And some simply could not believe that a young, Catholic woman could compose fiction so violent, dark, and, yes, grotesque. Two years after the publication of *Wise Blood*, O'Connor was accosted by an anonymous figure who unknowingly reflected much of the author's early reception:

I was in Nashville a couple of weeks ago visiting the Cheneys and met a man who looked at me a while and said, ‘That was a profound book. You don't look like

¹⁶ O'Connor to Elizabeth McKee, 17 February, 1949, in *The Habit of Being*, 9.

¹⁷ Quoted in Gooch, 164.

¹⁸ O'Connor to John Selby, 18 February, 1949, in *The Habit of Being*, 10.

you wrote it.’ I mustered up my squintiest expression and snarled, ‘Well, I did,’ but at the same time I had to recognize that he was right.¹⁹

In one of the first reviews of her work, Martin Greenberg stated, “You would never guess from the vigor and boldness of the writing that Flannery O’Connor is a woman,”²⁰ just as a recent review posted on Goodreads states, “I won’t give anything away, but it wasn’t what I would expect a young, Catholic woman from the South to write.”²¹ Yet when an author breaks from the expectations associated with commonplace labels, her reception can be marked by enthusiasm or confusion. Such a phenomenon has been seen since the publication of *Wise Blood* in 1952 and continues with the most recent remarks on Goodreads.

In chapter 1, I examined the ways in which the initial reception of *Wise Blood* was characterized by a general critical puzzlement with O’Connor’s thematic concerns, artistic performance, or both. The novel occasioned many reviews—but reviews written by readers whose “terms of notice” were more often O’Connor’s age, address, and sex than Hazel Motes’s car or Enoch Emery’s gorilla suit. Just what was being reviewed remained in question. With the publication of the second edition of *Wise Blood* in 1962, readers were more ready to discuss the novel’s ideas, also seen in the ways in which the designers of the novel’s cover art changed their approach. In chapter 2, I argued that the decade between the two editions of *Wise Blood* was one in which the critical community “discovered” O’Connor’s Catholicism, a part of her reputation that now seems obvious and dominant, but which was not always so. I applied Peter Rabinowitz’s ideas concerning a writer’s “authorial audience” to O’Connor, arguing that she had two such imagined audiences in mind as she wrote: one “genuine” and receptive to her themes

¹⁹ O’Connor to Elizabeth and Robert Lowell, 1 January, 1954, in *The Habit of Being*, 65.

²⁰ Martin Greenberg, “Books in Short,” *American Mercury* 75 (July, 1952), 111-113, in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 16.

²¹ Richard Chatfield, review of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, March 30, 2011, Goodreads.com (accessed September 1, 2013).

and vision of the world, the other “ironic” and assuming that her art was meant to attack those themes which, as we know from her letters and interviews, were to her of the greatest importance. An examination of the reviews of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) both reveal these two audiences at work in the shaping of O’Connor’s reputation, especially in their response to characters such as Mason Tarwater and his nephew, Rayber. There were, of course, critics who continued to dismiss O’Connor, like her characters, as a “fanatic” or as a voice from the “deep South,” but these were joined by those who had finally seen the “large and startling figures” O’Connor had painted.

Critics, of course, were not the only factors in the creation of O’Connor’s reputation. In chapter 3, I detailed the ways in which O’Connor’s death in 1965 spurred a number of publications—from obituaries to remembrances to a second collection of stories—all of which contributed to the breadth and depth of O’Connor’s reputation. The work of John Quinn in soliciting the opinions of other authors for the Winter 1964 issue of *Esprit* allows us to now accurately assess O’Connor’s standing among academics and fellow authors at the time of her death; the work of Robert Giroux in moving forward with what would become *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, published the same year, kept O’Connor’s name—and art—alive and the subject of renewed critical appreciation. While there were those who complained that the stories in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* were repetitious to a fault and that the reception of the collection was colored by the author’s death—a death which, as we have seen, became part of her reputation—the collection, along with its introduction by O’Connor insider Robert Fitzgerald, steered O’Connor’s reputation away from a regionalistic curiosity such as Erskine Caldwell to an artist comparable to Socrates and Dante. The publication of *Mystery and*

Manners in 1969 furthered the image of O'Connor as a thinker whose themes transcended a specific time or place.

Robert Giroux's work in fashioning O'Connor's reputation was far from over. In chapter 4, I demonstrated the ways in which, motivated by an almost vocational sense of duty towards O'Connor, he oversaw the publication of *The Complete Stories* in 1971. As I did with Fitzgerald's, I examined Giroux's introduction to the volume to present the ways in which he argued for a revision of O'Connor's reputation, from "Southern" to "American" author. Critics generally revealed that they had taken Giroux's advice when approaching O'Connor, writing of her as the insightful outsider that he presented her as being in his introduction. Critics could now speak of an "O'Connor type" when describing her characters and had now revised their past complaints about her "limits" into praise for her steadfast examination of a single, complex set of themes. O'Connor's posthumous awarding of the 1972 National Book Award for *The Collected Stories*, despite some objections from the press and at least one of the judges, was another event that raised O'Connor's cultural stock. In the same chapter, I also examined Giroux's collaboration—what some might have called collusion—with Sally Fitzgerald in collecting the letters for what would become *The Habit of Being* (1979), detailing the delicate negotiations in which Giroux and Fitzgerald had to engage with O'Connor's mother, Regina, in order to present what Giroux called the "total mosaic" of O'Connor's image. While these negotiations were fraught with frustrations on both sides, Regina's eventual agreement to let her daughter speak for herself was an important moment in her reputation: the reviews praised both Sally's non-interfering editorial style as well as O'Connor's voice.

In chapter 5, I examined in detail the work of two other O'Connor insiders, Benedict and Michael Fitzgerald, as they worked with John Huston to adapt *Wise Blood* for the cinema in

1979. As a member of the “ironic audience,” Huston may have not seemed like a good choice to helm the production. However, his straightforward approach and trust in O’Connor as a novelist allowed him to fashion a film faithful to O’Connor’s form and content—so much so, that he eventually relented in his ironic regard for the material and admitted he had been “had.” However, while Huston may have experienced an epiphany about O’Connor’s work, the marketing and reception of the film revealed that not much had changed since 1952: to many moviegoers, O’Connor was still offering dispatches from the Sarah of the Bozart. The split between genuine and ironic audiences still maintained: some viewers assumed that Motes’s self-blindness was an act of penance, while others regarded it as an act of defiance. Other media adaptations of O’Connor’s work reflected the same struggles of artists and audiences to come to terms with O’Connor’s themes. Both the successes (Karin Coonrod’s *Everything That Rises Must Converge*) and the failures (Cecil Dawkins’ *The Displaced Person*) reflected O’Connor’s reputation at the time.

The first five chapters thus examined the ways in which O’Connor’s reputation was steered and built by professionals: reviewers, academics, publishers, and artists working in other media whose regard for O’Connor affected both their output and her reputation. In chapter 6, however, I analyzed O’Connor’s presence on Goodreads as a way to gage her standing and image among contemporary, everyday readers. This analysis reveals that watchwords (such as “dark,” “difficult,” and “grotesque”) are still being used to categorize O’Connor, that a strong anti-Southern bias still affects some readers’ responses, and that her Catholicism is now taken for granted. Both the genuine and ironic audiences still seem to be very much in play. The main difference between the reviews from 1952 and those posted on Goodreads is that newer reviewers seem much more alert to O’Connor’s treatment of race. Some find proof of

O'Connor's "insensitivity" or inability to transcend what they imagine to be the culture of the South, while others applaud her "realism" in this regard. At any rate, the over 71,000 readers who have rated O'Connor's work (and posted over 4,600 reviews) reflect that her stature among both common and professional readers has risen, partly because of the ways in which reviewers and other figures who came before them have previously presented her work to the world. The examination of O'Connor's presence on Goodreads suggests that the same issues that arose with the 1952 publication of *Wise Blood* are still ongoing and still unsettled, although the value and prestige of the author has become canonical.

A passage from the previously-quoted portrait of O'Connor by Richard Gilman serves as a fitting reminder about how some regard the importance of literary reputation. Gilman writes of his being asked by Regina about the sales of her daughter's second novel:

One evening she said to me, while Flannery stared at her food in embarrassment, "Now I want you to tell me what's wrong with those publishers up there in New York. Do you know how many copies of Mary Flannery's novel have been sold? Three thousand two-hundred and seventy eight, that's how many copies of Mary Flannery's novel have been sold, and there is something very wrong with that, they are not doing right by her." I said that Farrar, Straus was a fine publisher, and that *The Violent Bear It Away* wasn't the kind of novel likely to have a big sale. And then I added that Flannery's reputation was more and more secure, and that was the important thing. "Important thing!" she snorted, "reputations don't buy groceries."²²

The split between Georgia and New York, the efforts of Robert Giroux, the power of Regina, the lack of sales regarded as proof of O'Connor's genius (or "secure" reputation)—much of the history of O'Connor's reputation that we have examined is present in this anecdote. But ultimately, Regina's joke about groceries suggests that the value of one's literary reputation depends upon who is willing to pay for it, either with actual or cultural capital. And if O'Connor has, perhaps, fallen short in terms of the former type when compared to the giants of the

²² Richard Gilman, "On Flannery O'Connor," in *The Contemporary Reviews*, 396.

American canon, she has gained ground over time in the latter. The prophet is recognized in her own house.

A second passage, by O'Connor herself, seems a suitable one with which to close this study. In one of the prayers she composed in 1946 while attending the Iowa Writers' Workshop, O'Connor asked God to inform, quite literally, her work: "Please let Christian principles permeate my writing and please let there be enough of my writing (published) for Christian principles to permeate."²³ That the prayers she composed during her time in Iowa would be released almost fifty years after her death as her *Prayer Journal*—and that an excerpt from them would appear in *The New Yorker*, a magazine that had scorned *Wise Blood*, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, and *The Violent Bear It Away* when they were first published—suggests the degree to which O'Connor has become an unquestioned figure in American letters. Thanks to her, Christian principles did "permeate" her writing; thanks to Robert Giroux, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, John Huston, and the readers in different audiences who continued to investigate her work, "enough" of it was published, although much of it after O'Connor's death. Her present reputation suggests that the continued publishing of her existing and newly-discovered work will continue—and continue to be received by different audiences in different venues.

²³ O'Connor, "My Dear God," *The New Yorker*, September 16, 2013, 26.

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