Introduction

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The idea for this book began to take shape in my mind at the Flannery O’Connor in an Age of Terrorism conference held at Grand Valley State University in October 2006. As a few of us chatted between sessions, a colleague mentioned that his “desert island” book of choice would be New Essays on Wise Blood, edited by Michael Kreyling (Cambridge University Press, 1995). This comment not only spoke to the enduring quality of the collection but also demonstrated how a focused series of essays on one of O’Connor’s novels could continue to yield deeper insights and new perspectives into her fiction. I immediately thought to myself, “Why is there no comparable collection on O’Connor’s second novel, The Violent Bear It Away?” After all, many have regarded this as her best novel, a more mature work, both structurally compelling and scripturally resonant. As it turned out, the next afternoon I went to a panel of papers, titled, remarkably, “New Essays on The Violent Bear It Away.” After the session, I approached the panel participants and suggested that we had a good start for a collection of essays on the novel. There was enthusiastic agreement and I set to pulling this book together.

The conference in Grand Rapids was on Flannery O’Connor and violence, a topic rendered all the more complex when interpreted in
relation to the religious themes pervading *The Violent Bear It Away*. In much of the general discourse on violence in O'Connor’s work, religion is held to be either the cause or a force behind the most penetrating critique. Some would argue even further that for O’Connor violence is a necessary outcome of divine justice. In the simplest of terms, the debate is usually divided between those who are critical of religion and those who want to defend or promote it. The difficulty of grasping honestly the question of violence, in human beings, in fiction, and in religion is a more subtle challenge that I believe the contributors to this book have met. The essays here resist the either/or characterizations of violence (as positive or negative, religious or nonreligious), instead raising the question in terms of both/and, without the compulsion to provide definitive answers to its meaning. By extending the scope of O’Connor’s religious and spiritual landscape further, beyond institutional notions of belief, the authors suggest expressions of faith found in human relationships and experiential rather than doctrinal encounters with the divine.

I was convinced that a new collection on *The Violent Bear It Away* needed to explore and push some of the well-worn assumptions prevalent in existing interpretations of the novel. In this motive, Michael Kreyling and I are on common ground with our collections on O’Connor’s two novels. He argues in his introduction to *New Essays on Wise Blood* that one reason “O’Connor’s fiction is interpreted with such solid consensus is that almost no one doubts her own testimony as to its Christian meaning” (Kreyling 3). His collection therefore aims to question the seemingly unthinking application of a religious template applied to O’Connor’s fiction, based on her own professions of faith: “As Christian tradition interprets the Bible as expressing one Word in each and all of its many parts, so is O’Connor’s fiction given a similar unity, wholeness, and transcendental authority.” The essays on *Wise Blood* are thus meant to “question this process and accretion” (4). These two points are worth distinguishing: one concerns the choice whether to believe O’Connor’s claim that her fiction is informed by her Christian vision; the second is how scholars use that religious claim to proffer a more “authoritative” meaning to O’Connor’s fiction.

There have been enough moralistic religious interpretations of O’Connor’s fiction to keep this complaint ringing in our ears for some
time. Such a critique, however, remains inadequate when it comes to religious interpretations that neither use O’Connor’s own religious beliefs as a platform nor promote a single “whole” religious ideology as the hermeneutical key to her fiction. This collection proffers myriad forms of religious interpretation without resorting to dogmatic assertions. If there is one all too common and problematic approach to reading religion, or, more specifically, the “Christian tradition,” it is the assumption that one can possibly find “one Word” to provide the unity that Kreyling supposes scholars use for interpreting O’Connor’s religious fiction. A kind of rigidity prevails when one makes assumptions about what O’Connor’s religious vision is, and then uncritically applies it to her fiction. Religious pronouncements will invariably collide with any interpretation of the violence in her fiction, left only with the choice of either dismissing or justifying it. Cursory or judgmental explanations fail to account for the nuances in O’Connor’s thought and art. While each essay stands on its own as a reading of violence in the novel, the collection as a whole considers religion as lived experience, not ideology.

What the following essays share is a personal and committed approach to religious ideas in their complex incarnations, critically testing different interpretations and always cognizant of the violence that cuts through O’Connor’s whole canon. The title for this collection comes from the opening essay by Richard Giannone, “Dark Night, Dark Faith: Hazel Motes, the Misfit, and Francis Marion Tarwater,” underlining the fact that Flannery O’Connor’s art does not shy from reckoning with the darkness of faith. To this end, a passage from the Jewish theologian Martin Buber’s Eclipse of God—read by O’Connor—illuminates what the present collection seeks to explore regarding O’Connor’s religious sensibilities, seldom affected by the sentimental or saccharine:

the crucial religious experiences of man do not take place in a sphere in which creative energy exists without contradiction, but in a sphere in which evil and good, despair and hope, the power of destruction and the power of rebirth, dwell side by side. The divine force which man actually encounters in life does not hover above the demonic, but penetrates it. To confine God to a producing
function is to remove Him from the world in which we live—a world filled with burning contradictions, and with yearning for salvation. (21)

Giannone’s essay is especially representative of an analysis that delves into the darker places of faith, where the deepest uncertainty and hope thrive, in the lives of three of O’Connor’s most memorable characters: Hazel Motes, the Misfit, and Francis Tarwater. Each journey is charted as a course of self-discovery for those who are both unbelievers and yet seekers. The meeting point, or symbol of darkness for these explorations, is the pit or the ditch, a literal and metaphorical image used by O’Connor to convey a deeper spiritual chasm.

John F. Desmond’s essay, “The Lost Childhood of George Rayber,” maps some of the more remote details of the young man’s life portrayed in The Violent Bear It Away, revealing the complexity of his darkest moments of self-recognition. Quick assumptions about Rayber’s rationalism abound in O’Connor scholarship, and Desmond’s perceptive insights challenge these treatments of Rayber and offer a compelling side of his character not yet explored. Gary M. Ciuba’s essay, “‘NOT HIS SON’: Violent Kinship and the Spirit of Adoption in The Violent Bear It Away,” also traces the subtle undertones of the complex familial relationships in the novel, probing O’Connor’s appreciation of orphanhood and arguing how O’Connor was “redrawing the boundaries of family life so that they transcend biology and make room for the most unlikely of members.” Ciuba looks at the violence in kinship ties from the perspective of the orphaned Francis Tarwater and his search for identity, while engaging current research in adoption studies to deepen the reader’s understanding of the psychological and spiritual meaning of affiliation.

Jason Peters’ essay, “Abstraction and Intimacy in Flannery O’Connor’s The Violent Bear It Away,” demonstrates how the “threatened intimacy of creation” in the novel dramatizes the tension between Mason and Rayber, outlining the theological implications of their choices. Peters also expands his analysis beyond the novel to consider the way in which O’Connor’s insights into Manicheanism reflect an increasingly disembodied world. Peters evaluates the violence of abstraction, an idea that ultimately distances human beings from themselves, each
Introduction

other, and the land on which they walk. Another example of a study that chooses to push beyond the limits of abstraction and explore “the monstrous struggle precipitated by affliction” is Ruthann Knechel Johansen’s essay on Flannery O’Connor and Simone Weil: “Transfiguring Affliction: Simone Weil and Flannery O’Connor.” Johansen delves into the darkness of faith in the novel through Weil’s analysis of affliction, interpreting the inherited Tarwater bloodline as an experience of affliction and tracing its theological connotations.

Scott Huelin explores the question of imago Dei in his essay, “Only Love Overcomes Violence: The Violent Bear It Away as Case Studies in Theological Ethics.” Huelin offers an interpretation of the novel based on three different responses to the question of what “image” of God inheres in human beings. The dominant ideas in Western theological ethics, he argues, are reason, will, and love, and his study focuses on each of these possibilities as they are lived by the characters of Rayber, Francis Tarwater, and Bishop, respectively. Continuing some of the biblical and ethical themes raised in Huelin’s essay, P. Travis Kroeker and Karl E. Martin both undertake a discussion of the novel’s primary tropes in light of two different gospels. Travis Kroeker’s essay, “‘Jesus Is the Bread of Life’: Johannine Sign and Deed in The Violent Bear It Away” delineates the prophetic thrust of the novel with a reading of Jesus’ words and deeds in John’s gospel. Kroeker explains how O’Connor’s second novel is imbued with a Johannine apocalyptic prophetic pattern, upon which he builds a focused analysis of the tropes of baptism and Jesus’ representation as the bread of life. Karl Martin, employing similar themes of prophecy, messianism, and violence, argues for a close relationship between the gospel of Matthew and novel. Martin’s essay, “Suffering Violence in the Kingdom of Heaven,” suggests that even beyond the title and the epigraph, the gospel of Matthew provides the novel with its primary structure, images, and symbols. He focuses on the child Bishop as key to the transformation that occurs in Francis Tarwater’s understanding of the kingdom of heaven. These twinned essays provide a striking comparative account of O’Connor’s use of different biblical texts to illumine the novel’s central themes. Concluding the collection is my essay, “Asceticism and Abundance: The Communion of Saints in The Violent Bear It Away,” which augments my previous research on asceticism in the novel with a renewed effort to
examine the possibility of divine fulfillment and abundance. Guided by O’Connor’s understanding of the communion of saints as a bond between the living and the dead, I trace the idea of hunger in the novel as it signals desire and Francis Tarwater’s search for something beyond himself.

My hope is that readers will be opened to a new appreciation for O’Connor’s religious vision in *The Violent Bear It Away*: the centrality of love, the struggle with faith, the darkness of uncertainty and its attending violence. *Dark Faith* allows for some critical voices to unravel common assumptions about religion and violence without sacrificing the artistic integrity of O’Connor’s novel. Each essay invites the attentive reader into the darker turns of faith, but with a wider perspective: the darkness is only a part of the world in which we live, one that Martin Buber describes as “filled with burning contradictions, and with yearning for salvation.” The myriad approaches to the novel gathered here attest to the fullness of O’Connor’s legacy as an artist who grappled with the “burning contradictions” in the divine-human experience.

**WORKS CITED**


CHAPTER 1

Dark Night, Dark Faith
Hazel Motes, the Misfit,
and Francis Marion Tarwater

RICHARD GIANNONE

Don’t expect faith to clear things up for you. It is trust, not certainty.

—Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being*

The people who walked in darkness have seen great light; Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

—Isaiah 9:2

Citizens of Taulkinham, Tennessee, who ventured to the city’s outskirts on a stormy winter night not long after the end of World War II would have quite a shock waiting for them. Amid slashing rain, they might come upon a young blind man of crushed frame, who less than a year before was discharged from military service and who now could be seen slogging beside a road. Wheezing from influenza, the cripple
wears a drenched wheat-colored hat and soggy faded blue suit—that attire and nothing more to protect him against the icy gloom, always pushing. His cane pokes the way toward something he cannot see, but wants. The lure is there, in the wind, in the outer dark; it lurks behind neighbors’ houses, races down the alley, sweeping onto the wayside out of town, but he can never catch up to it. Were onlookers to follow the blind man all the way to where his strength fails, they would find him, as do two policemen, clumsily feeling his way along “a drainage ditch near an abandoned construction project” (CW 130).

Here in the ditch the search of Hazel Motes, the hero of Flannery O’Connor’s Wise Blood (1952), plays out. The man who said, “I don’t believe in anything” (CW 43), has reached the end of the line in pursuing what he does not believe. Step by dogged step, the pilgrim has gone the distance. Motes is not the only character to land in a pit. There are many unbelievers in O’Connor’s fiction, and all find themselves in a ditch. O’Connor may have been unmoved by European shrines and cathedrals, but the gullies and ravines along the roads of her native Baldwin County in middle Georgia aroused her curiosity. A cavity gapes in every O’Connor story and in both novels. The size and topography of the chasm vary according to the character’s predicament, but the frightfulness is constant. Sheppard in “The Lame Shall Enter First” teeters on “the edge of a pit” (CW 632) that burrows into the “dank-smelling and empty” (CW 693) shaft old Tanner must descend in “Judgment Day” and carves out “the pit of despair” (CW 554) engulfing Asbury Porter Fox in “The Enduring Chill,” then spills out to the “tide of darkness” inundating the “world of guilt and sorrow” (CW 500) awaiting Julian in “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” sinking further and spreading wider into the bottomless “hole” quarried out at “the new lakeside” (CW 525) by Mark Fortune’s greed in “A View of the Woods.” All end in the hole they have dug for themselves. Many of the pitfalls awaiting the unwary are tinted by the natural red of the earth; all are stained with human blood, some with sweat and tears.

The ditch, through various representations, condenses O’Connor’s essential drama. The empty place marks not only a Georgia or Tennessee locale but also the wandering pit that is life itself. In fact, O’Connor develops a canonical palimpsest of biblical, ancient, medieval, and e-
chatological hollows. By charging these prototypical images of dark, depressed places with her unbelievers’ modern experience of hitting the spirit’s bottom and with her own personal struggle, O’Connor gives a profound rendering of our empty age. There is much to say about the mental divagations that drive the characters to the ditch; and there is a great deal to excavate in the void itself, for the ditch leads to obscurities more uncharted than Dante’s hell, which I believe O’Connor had in mind. Like’s Dante’s dark pit, O’Connor’s inky ditch is filled with judgment and meaning. Unlike the shades going down to the medieval place of no return, however, O’Connor’s pit-dwellers do not march inexorably to their doom. For all of O’Connor’s preoccupation with sin, her modern abyss is not devoid of hope but filled with a self-understanding that holds the possibility of belief for unbelievers such as Motes.

One way into this complex topic of belief and unbelief is through a comment by Jean-Paul Sartre, who articulated the philosophical position holding sway after World War II when O’Connor was writing. “Atheism is a cruel and long-range affair,” Sartre wrote. “I think I’ve carried it through” (253). The Frenchman has accurately caught the grim mood and determination of Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*, O’Connor’s requiem for World War II. In carrying through his atheistic task all the way to death at twenty-two, Motes deals with the same historical forces of warfare and uncertainty besieging Sartre. Surrounded by the horrors of bloodshed, Sartre along with Albert Camus, another shaper of the modern mind, saw a world without ultimate meaning and felt the need to create meaning for themselves. Suffering, they saw, imposes a solemn obligation to rebel against the evil torturing humankind. Sartre—and, even more, Camus—argued that Christians are held back from responding to the anguish of this world by placing their hope in the world to come. Camus’ and Sartre’s ethical grappling with doubt and suffering influentially challenged Christianity at its core. Their reasoned opposition to her faith resonated with O’Connor. It was her recognition of religion’s moral responsibility being rubbed by theirs.

O’Connor, I suggest, accepts the challenge that existentialism issues. Suffering is her subject too. Her reply incorporates the theoretical framework of existential philosophy that assumes people are, above
all, driven to find meaning in their lives. In responding to the pain of our age, she is, moreover, as a Christian as morally engaged with those who do not believe as Sartre and Camus are with those who consent to Christianity. One feature of O’Connor’s witness is her concern for the ordeals undergone by those without faith. She recognizes that unbelievers experience life as deeply as do believers, but differently. This sympathy comes through poignantly in an undated letter of 1959 to Louise Abbot, a young Georgia writer who became a valued friend. “I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. I know what torment this is, but I can only see it, in myself anyway, as the process by which faith is deepened” (HB 353–54). The deeper sounding of faith does not dispel the gloom of enigma or contradiction enveloping those struggling to believe. Both believer and unbeliever must trudge on through the dimness that is the human condition. Far from making light of the ordeal, O’Connor uses doubt as Motes relies on his cane—and to progress through the very same haziness. “You arrive at enough certainty to be able to make your way,” O’Connor encouragingly remarks to Abbot; and then from grounded calm she delivers a sober adversative, “but it is making it in darkness” (354). The night does not lift. Nor does the hope of day, the day without end, wane.

O’Connor’s aim in her stories and novels is not to dismiss the unbelief of her time but to understand its strife and build on its authentic conscience. We need look no farther than the neglected construction site at the end of Wise Blood to see where O’Connor’s self-appointed job of reconstruction lies. Like Buford Munson in The Violent Bear It Away (1960), O’Connor picks up the work others leave behind. Her project is to sift through the remains of war to find ground on which spiritually to build anew.

The sinkhole in the vacant lot hardly presents itself as worthy of religious interest, but that is what the construction site holds for O’Connor. To understand how she endows the forsaken place with sacred properties the reader needs an eye of hope. This way of seeing comes not through the lens of dogma, institutional guidance, or intelligence. The power inheres in the darkness itself. In this deep opacity we have the presentiment of the mystery of faith. One enters interiorly by the
heart into a movement of revelation. What this dark uncovers is not a new area of knowledge so much as something disturbing about ourselves. A light shines in the unbeliever’s dark. This light is beyond the light we are used to. By blinks and dazed glances, eyes averted and riveted, the stunned unbeliever, like an owl blinded by the sun, catches a gleam. This ray signals the entrance into the dark of a faith.

The experience in the night of unbelief, as I see it, is a three-stage process. It begins with a devastating awareness of culpability. That initial sense of guilt generates the sense of a need for mercy. And an experienced need for mercy points the way to a relationship with God. In effect, O’Connor’s ditch combines the geography of Dante’s descending hell with the psychology of his rising Mount Purgatory. The stages could be summarized as knowledge, forgiveness, and divine kinship.

The stress that O’Connor lays upon each phase in any given work varies according to the unbelieving protagonist’s moral needs and temperament. Wherever the emphasis falls, however, the pit into which the unbeliever tumbles proves to be a place to encounter the source of life, which is God Godself.

Here I want to glimpse into the empty place where O’Connor’s unbelievers find themselves to consider the moral outcome of their adventure. This exploration requires a brief statement about the darkness in which O’Connor locates modern life. Then the discussion considers three unbelievers who chart the progression of O’Connor’s treatment of unbelief: Hazel Motes, the war veteran in *Wise Blood*, the Misfit, the escaped convict in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and Francis Marion Tarwater, the reluctant prophet-elect in *The Violent Bear It Away*. All three are cut from the same modern, incredulous cloth. They differ in age and intellectual grasp of unbelief, but all are ardent, even principled, exponents of nihilism. If pure or single-minded of heart, they are not clean of hands. They are killers. Strikingly, they are also seekers. As seekers, they draw God’s compassion. On the immense poverty of their unbelief O’Connor founds the immensity of hope. After marking their new relation to God, I consciously move away in my final observations from the cool detachment expected of literary commentary to participate in O’Connor’s presentation of a dark faith that sustains one in present grief and allows one to face whatever is to come.
For O’Connor darkness is the condition of the modern age. “Right now,” O’Connor says in a letter of 6 September 1955, “the whole world seems to be going through a dark night of the soul” (HB 100). In the mystical life-process from which O’Connor makes her observation, darkness results from the loss of the divine light that the soul has previously experienced. God is absent. This vacuum, O’Connor notes, “is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead” (90). In fairness to the positive thrust of his stark declaration, Nietzsche also put forward the possibility of intellectual enlargement, for he saw in the death of God the freedom for humankind to seek a new foundation of morality beyond that of failed Christian institutions.

In aligning the mystic’s dark night with Nietzsche’s death of God, O’Connor theologizes divine absence. God’s disappearance for her leaves a void in which the person roams in falsehood and illusion. Deprived of clarity and moral direction, the soul is exposed to trials of many kinds, interior and exterior. Impotence, blankness, and aridity take hold. Negation blankets consciousness. O’Connor’s stance is the mystic’s view. “The soul,” says John of the Cross, “is conscious of a profound emptiness in itself, a cruel destitution. . . . It sees itself in the midst of . . . miserable imperfections, dryness and emptiness of the understanding, and abandonment of the spirit in darkness” (Underhill 391). With the loss of the light of divine companionship comes the loss of self-control that renders the soul unable to progress on its own. Nevertheless, the questing soul must keep struggling. Perseverance gains relief from deprivation. The torments and desolations of the dark night strengthen the soul through purgation of doubt. The dark night, then, from the standpoint of mystical desire, is a necessary stage in the growth of spiritual awareness. In the end, the soul surrenders as the crisis passes; the dark night fades; and the spirit moves toward union with God.

O’Connor’s use of the mystical experience is selective. The ecstasy of illumination with its rapturous levitation that precedes the dark night does not appear in her writing. Although the stories in her posthumous collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965) do
flash hints of the characters drawing close to God, the bliss attending union with God lies outside O’Connor’s writing. O’Connor deals primarily with the intermediate dark state of the Godward journey. She locates the moral sphere of all her art when describing “the loss of faith” as “the underlying subject” of Wise Blood (HB 130). For those seeking God, thrashing in the dark is the cost of living in the modern world.

Hazel Motes exemplifies life in the dark night of the spirit at mid-twentieth century. The war showed Motes on a massive scale that governments and societies believe in nothing. Entire cities exist to be sent up in vapors. Weapons and death camps are built to slaughter over sixty million people. Millions more are displaced from their homeland. To the army, Motes himself is little more than cannon fodder, shipped halfway around the world, injured, and forgotten. Getting home, then, is more than usually urgent. Wounded by shrapnel, O’Connor’s soldier seeks a sanctuary from bloodshed. Crippled from having meaning taken from him, he needs something to sustain him. The promises of American liberal democracy are as empty as the construction pit. Post-war America affords neither safety nor meaning. Far from belonging here, Motes is as much an exile in the volunteer state, from which he was dragooned, as he is in North Africa, where he fought.

Trained by his grandfather to trust in God, Motes naturally looks to religion to count as a person. What he finds in Taulkinham, instead, are imaginary Christs, pseudo-religions, and religious unbelief that compete with secular unbelief for followers. Kitchen gadgets are marketed alongside scripture. False prophets proliferate to the degree that a believer must fake unbelief to get attention. The bogus and counterfeit prevail. Having internalized deceit and brutality, people take emotional and physical violence as normative. Inevitably, human relationships suffer because people use one another. Death is a national sport. The knowing boardinghouse owner Mrs. Flood, “who had had a hard life” (CW 130), sums it up perfectly: “Mr. Motes, there’s nobody to help us,’ she said. ‘Nobody. The world is a empty place” (128), one big ditch. One finds disquieting echoes of the landlady’s plaint throughout O’Connor’s short stories and novels. What Motes basically encounters upon his return is entrenched nihilism, the total rejection of law and decency that caused the terrible armed carnage that still plagues his shrapnel-ridden
body and shredded spirit. In narrating the final months of Motes's life, O'Connor reaches deep into modern nightmares.

This soldier's search is short and bitter. In less than a year, after a crash course in homegrown disbelief, he ends up groping “along the edge of the ditch” fumbling for something to hold on to (CW 131). By the time the police find Motes, it is daylight; but for the blind seeker the hour has always been nighttime. Sightless, goalless, and godless, the man lies waiting a destiny that lies beyond his grasp. But not beyond O'Connor's moral gaze. She sees the nihilist's fate, the soldier's destiny, the human end all as part of the creative movement of divine life.

O'Connor's regard for the unbeliever brings us to the perplexing intersection of belief and unbelief. There is not a trace of uncertainty about Motes's incredulity. Motes considers his not believing in anything to be true. Whether or not he can supply intellectual reasons for his inner conviction, Motes upholds negation (not unjustly) as accurate to his experience of the world. The whole of his life is based on this trustful unbelief. It determines his relations with others. His disbelief goes so deep that he kills for his truth and blinds himself to atone for its trickery. Such a principled and committed conscience, though not his violence, wins O'Connor's respect. She calls Motes, as many think of Camus, “a kind of saint” (HB 89).

Motes’s sanctity arises from confrontation and resistance. He fights against religious smugness and deceit. His instincts revved for combat, Motes's opening conversation on the homebound train with the righteous Mrs. Wally Bee Hitchcock pulls the reader directly into the O'Connor battlefield. He brazenly assails his fellow passenger with the sanctimonious assumption behind her prim manners: “I reckon you think you been redeemed” (CW 6). He seeks a truth to live by but does not see truth in Christians. Later, he snarls, “You ain't true” (88) to one of several prophets hawking pseudo-Christianity. The accusation applies to others in the novel, many of whom profess Christianity. Whereas Jesus was a man for others, the Christians Motes encounters look out only for themselves. Because Christians do not live by their belief, Motes rejects the god they worship. His attack is as much cultural as it is theological.

Motes's withholding belief in the God of Christian revelation may invite O’Connor’s fascination but not her condemnation. Unbelief is
not, in her writing, a term of denunciation. Rather, it is a descriptive term characterizing the mental position of one who does not believe in the Christian God who is the center of O’Connor’s personal faith. In her 1962 note to *Wise Blood*, O’Connor three times goes out of her way to honor Hazel Motes as a man of “integrity” (*CW* 1265). Belief in Christ for O’Connor is personally “a matter of life and death” (1265), and the measure of her faith is the degree to which she, who numbers herself among a believing community, concerns herself with those persons outside the community of belief. Unbelief too is so much a matter of life and death that the struggle of unbelievers and the discoveries they make are concomitant, I suggest, with belief. O’Connor’s deniers all try seriously to take their bearings in the outside world in their relation to people, to things, and to the earth and universe.

In O’Connor’s novels and stories, unbelief is no single attitude of mind. True unbelievers come in a wide array. They range from insouciant Christians who do not believe a word of Christianity to aggressive despisers. In between lie the garden variety of passive amoralists, missionary secularists, zealous agnostics, raging heathens, and combative atheists whose lively political and racial rigidities enrich the drama of everyday life in modern America. Empathetic engagement with the varieties of unbelievers accounts for much of O’Connor’s distinctive theology, not to mention her artistic brilliance and comedy.

If these narratives do not portray a Julian of Norwich taking succor in Mother Jesus or a Catherine of Siena betrothed to her divine bridegroom or a Meister Eckhart hovering in irresistible trance, O’Connor’s fiction does give us glimpses of the mystical talent in common people. To readers’ continual amazement, each of O’Connor’s disbeliefing protagonists manifests a slight hidden talent, some greater, some lesser, for intimacy with God. This spark of spirit abides in the neglected construction site and its adjacent barrens of the characters’ soul that is their dark night.

When the policeman destroys Motes’s car, Motes sees that he has placed his belief in a material vessel that cannot hold it. The experience of nothingness that overtakes Motes in the ditch proves to be a fruitful starting place for his moral and ethical inquiry. By taking unbelief all the way to its inevitable results, Motes comes to new knowledge of himself. With his inner eye he recognizes that he has invented a false
self out of a lifeless doctrine that leaves him without power. Seeing the shards of his constructed self opens the way to a new self, a true self that will not be lied to. In the dark of physical blindness he strikes the true unseen ground of being. On these dark grounds, God begins to be.

Although the former combatant is blind and cannot take up physical work on the halted project, we sense that he is onto a plan to reform his inner life. The blueprint is there in the starry sky on the night he arrives in Taulkingham. A hidden power presses him in a certain direction and molds him to the certain design set by the “long silver streaks” in the “black sky” (CW 19). This new mission consumes him. Every sinew of his body, the fragile token of his humanness, is swept up into the last leg of his search. Paradoxically, as his body weakens, his spirit strengthens; and his seeking leads him to the source of life that is his true home in the darkness of faith.

Darkness encompasses the drama of Wise Blood from the opening scene on the train speeding south past the deep red sun on the edge of remote woods to the final deathbed vigil in Taulkingham. O’Connor focuses relentlessly on Hazel Motes as he moves from the oncoming darkness of twilight to the faceless dark of death. Death’s dark leads to a deeper dark. With her eyes shut, the landlady Mrs. Flood at the end stares into the dead Motes’s eyes to see him receding “farther and farther into the darkness” (CW 131). This unfathomable darkness has “the pin point of light” (131) that at once holds and illumes the dark mystery of faith. “Faith is blindness,” O’Connor writes to Betty Hester, a troubled correspondent whose theological dilemmas elicited provocative responses that invariably go to the heart of the matter at hand, “and now you can see” (HB 455).

And at the end of Wise Blood the benighted Mrs. Flood gains some of that sightless trust. First, she must “shut her eyes” (CW 131). Then, by the sight in her soul, the landlady senses things in Motes that we, the near-blind readers, can try to discern. Trained by O’Connor’s resolute view, we can overcome our incredulity to see the integrity in Motes’s nihilism. Unbelief is his truth, and he obeys that truth to the end. In loyalty to his truth lies danger and dignity. When Motes hits bottom, he comes to a hard understanding of himself. Near death, he knows that he has no faith, and he knows that he must have faith. The man who founded the Church Without Christ to justify his belief that “Nobody
with a good car needs to be justified” (64) learns that his own cause does not win out. Motes lies in the ditch judged wrong before his personal experience of life. He trusted his will, and it failed him. He, not Jesus, is the liar. Having relied on words to blaspheme, Motes remains silent about his terrible repentance with quicklime that extends his course into blindness. His last words, uttered to the arresting policemen, simply state his resolve to soldier on. “I want to go on where I’m going” (131). He has made headway. And he is in a hurry not to rush.

It comes as no surprise that Motes, the Green Beret of the Church Without Christ, cannot win the battle to be justified either in his mind or in God’s sight. The wonder is that humankind can even conceive the idea of being right before the Absolute, which is to say before life and before God. The added marvel is that O’Connor shows that modern unbelievers do not see this unattainable supposition as preposterous. But then O’Connor knows when to smile. In the end, the absurdity of Motes’s claims elicits her warm humor. After all, he obeys his truth. For Motes to obey truth is to be free from the illusion of self-sufficiency and to be free at last from nothingness. The good soldier has fought the good fight.

In death, Motes’s “composed” (CW 131) face suggests his coming into full being. Advent, the season of arrival or coming into being, is very much in the winter air. Mrs. Flood associates the point of light with the star of Bethlehem on Christmas cards that signals O’Connor’s calm reconfiguring of the Christmas Night Office. The evening prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours, which O’Connor would have known, promises that “the darkness that covered the earth” gives way “to the bright dawn” of Jesus’ incarnate Logos. That nocturnal trust occasions the diurnal petition, “Make us a people of this light” (Hours 420). As Hazel Motes ebbs into the pin or pure point of light, the outcast seeker joins the people of this light in the silence that is their homeland.

**SELF-KNOWLEDGE**

Freedom is the state of being the Misfit seeks as he skulks the Georgia back roads in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” and with good reason. His is a lifetime of confinements, in and out of jail. The most recent
lockup was in the Federal Penitentiary from which he has just escaped. Being out of prison provides no release. He carries within him a lockup from which he cannot slip away. The warden is life itself. The unfairness of the world defies his understanding. That one person “is punished a heap and another ain’t punished at all” (CW 151) offends his absolute sense of justice. The inequity of life, as though anything human can be perfectly just, bedevils the moral purist because it makes life absurd, intolerable. The Misfit does not realize that if life were just, there would be no need for God. Like the positivist who disparages both faith and speculation and insists on hard facts for assurance, the Misfit in actuality seeks a rational fiction.

For all of his mental rigidities, the Misfit is on to a truth about the world. The anguish with which he seethes over the plight of humankind rings with the authenticity of a prophet’s exhausted rage. The Misfit does not sugarcoat the unfairness around him. To his credit, he owns up to the malice in himself. Good human blood spills for no reason, so why not shed more? There is little gore that he has not seen. His eye can bear the sight of any cruelty, but his mind cannot put up with the disparity between all the punishments that seem to outweigh their crimes. The Misfit is a tough moralist, not to say rigorist. He is at once O’Connor’s most tender malefactor in recognizing suffering and the most brutal in meting it out.

The Misfit’s fierce sense of justice sensitizes him to a truth about Jesus’ sacrifice that many Christians pass over. The Misfit understands that Jesus is totally innocent and mercilessly punished. Such a miscarriage of justice affronts reason, which for the Misfit is the only basis for action, event, and fact. Since life must be rational and logical, the Misfit needs to know why things are out of whack. His need to know becomes his reason not to believe. Unbelief born of pure reason boxes him in. To numb the pain of self-entombment, the inmate tortures himself like a caged animal. “‘Turn to the right, it was a wall,’ The Misfit said. . . . ‘Turn to the left, it was a wall. Looking up it was a ceiling, look down it was a floor’” (150). This description of the federal slammer doubles as a snapshot of his mind that shuts the door to what he cannot grasp by reason. All the while he laments being trapped, he is looking up at “the cloudless sky” (150) that reveals a vast horizon of experience he says no to. Nature, people, and Jesus have no meaning, offer no contentment.
“Nobody had nothing I wanted” (150), he boasts. A world he cannot understand is a world without pleasure. Although the Misfit rebuffs the world, he still seeks to know Jesus, a desire not found in all Christians. Here he is, wracked in pain and seeking satisfaction, and yet refusing to heed the feelings in and around him to move beyond a maddening, disabling rationality.

Fittingly, we encounter the morbid jailbird on the lam as he gets out of a stolen black hearselike car along a dirt road and ever so carefully steps down ten feet of an embankment into a ditch. In the ditch, the Misfit meets the grandmother. In a ditch, the Misfit confesses the pain of his life sentence. In the ditch, he encounters a true penitential opportunity to atone. In the ditch, mercy comes, as it always does, abruptly and without reason. As the grandmother experiences the methodical slaughter of her son, daughter-in-law, and three grandchildren, she hears the Misfit plead to know by direct experience Jesus’ raising the dead. This demand for immediate, certain contact with God makes faith, the only way to experience Jesus, unnecessary. Thoughts of Jesus smolder in the killer’s mind. Manacled to unbelief, his rage at and desire for Jesus’ resurrecting power strikes the grandmother’s heart deeper than any logical argument or bullet could reach. She does not think about what to do. The woman certainly does not pause to analyze the gunman’s desire for conclusive, physical interaction with God. She feels the Misfit’s burning need and responds to it. She acts. Faith is an event. It comes freely into being as a consequence of her self-donation.

Indifferent to her own dignity and life, but fortified by the plenitude of self-giving, the grandmother draws close to the convict’s “face twisted” (CW 152) by psychic torment over Jesus. With extraordinary, ladylike courtesy, she touches his bare shoulder to adopt the Misfit as one of her children. This ordinary gesture gives highest expression to the sacrament of the moment. It is a profound and calm act of faith, one that gestures to dispel evil. In effect, the grandmother becomes the estranged Misfit’s godmother.

Here as elsewhere in the O’Connor world, the body is a place of God’s acting in us, where God’s action is revealed. In the ditch, physical dread teaches the grandmother’s soul how to be free, free to love. Her hand of mercy points the way out of the walls sealing the Misfit in the dark of self-hatred and unbelief. His excruciating need to know elicits
mercy from the grieving grandmother. The widow’s mite shakes the Misfit’s universe under the impact of loving sacrifice. Her benevolence exposes her captor’s inability to say yes to her yes. Like a horse that rears up at the sight of a rattlesnake, the Misfit is spooked by kindness. He is so ashamed of his spiritually tattered life that he has to demean and destroy the person helping him. He seems possessed by a demon that seeks new ways to hurt him and keep in stir. Too weak to accept love, too proud of estrangement to incur the humble responsibilities of true freedom, the Misfit robotically pumps three rounds through her chest.

As belief in mercy makes the grandmother believe in herself, so unbelief crushes his sense of personal stability and worth. If we trace the Misfit’s impulsive hatred back to its source, it takes us to self-hatred. Whereas the grandmother attests to faith by simply acting, the Misfit must go to the extreme of killing to prove himself right. Also, there is something possessive in this unbeliever’s attitude. Unconsciously, the outlaw is saying that the grandmother and the world must be like him and he will hammer with bullets her and reality into his limitations. This is self-sabotage.

Nihilism aims to discourage and desolate; mercy, an outpouring of belief, wishes to save the sinner. From the Misfit’s preoccupation with Jesus, we sense that for all his self-flagellating rationality he yearns for deliverance. The rescue he seeks is at hand in the flesh, but he cannot understand the need for a savior apart from himself. As a result, isolation and pain please him more than does liberty. The scourge of the Misfit’s unbelief is an inability to enjoy life that attends a marked incapacity for intimate human relationships. One of his accomplices exclaims that killing the family is “fun.” The very idea of mirth or enjoyment angers the Misfit. In his response, the killer reveals himself to be not only a slayer of the body; he is also an assaulter of the mind. “‘Shut up, Bobby Lee [the accomplice],’ The Misfit said. ‘It’s no real pleasure in life’” (CW 153). These are the Misfit’s last words but not the final word of the moral drama.

I have always felt that there is more to the ending of “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” than I have grasped, that there is more to this richly imagined moment than a disparity between the Misfit’s narrative of evil and the grandmother’s narrative of good. I would like to try again, this time building on a simple fact that anchors the understory. Plainly,
the grandmother, though far from a saint, does not deserve her suffering. Typical of O’Connor, the grandmother’s punishment surpasses the cause. Even more exceptional, victims do not usually forgive those who harm them. When they do, we stand before a holy mystery. Belief does not come of itself. The grandmother’s heart is torn by the joy of forgiveness and the grief of her family’s massacre. Neither edict, nor learning, nor reason, makes the grandmother available to faith to the point of sharing her assailant’s anguish. O’Connor wants the reader to respond to the dark cruelty and irrationality in the ditch through awe. In keeping with the gentle motion of the grandmother’s hand contacting the Misfit, amazement comes lightly. With Elijah, we learn that the Lord comes not in earthquake, the wind, or lightning, but in the soft whisper of the breeze (1 Kings 19:11–12 and see HB 373). The moment the grandmother offers in compassion and fidelity her maternal bosom, an indefinite lightness of heart descends on the merciful woman. Then wonder glitters in the weird and breathtaking light coming from the old woman’s “face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (CW 152).

The facial glow advances in two directions of self-knowledge. With the grandmother, there is a natural inner lighting toward faith. Although the Misfit’s sin is the occasion, the grandmother’s instinct enters through pardon yet more deeply into the dark of faith. Her experience of uncertainty is prerequisite for renewal of faith. Such insecurity is the preliminary condition to new life. When the grandmother goes beyond right and wrong to risk all to forgive, fear loses its grip. Her touching the killer’s shoulder imprints a spiritual sentiment in him. Her face brightens with a courage radiating outward to affect the Misfit’s vulnerability. “Without his glasses, the Misfit’s eyes were red-rimmed and pale and defenseless-looking” (CW 153). Since the need for positive proof and clarity blinded him to decency and truth, obscurity brought by weeping can only improve the Misfit’s vision. Tears can clear away foreign particles of torment and self-deception.

Sorrow and emptiness have brought the Misfit to yet another penitentiary, this one without judicial bars of containment but rather opened by the gate of penance to its unconditional obligations. As the grandmother’s horror dissolves into tenderness through the power of mercy, so the Misfit’s gruesome violence could disperse through penance. The discipline of penance lies before the murderer “in a puddle of
blood with her legs crossed” (CW 152). The grandmother’s persecuted body offers a lesson in the demand that penance makes, namely that one respond at all costs to our neighbor’s need. The Misfit must stop killing people and begin to atone for those he put to death. The remorse filling his bloodshot eyes suggests that his empty soul sues for fulfillment. Although the ferocity of the Misfit’s hatred lingers in the air, the incentive to make amends glimmers in the grandmother’s smile conveying a pleasure and human acceptance he has not felt in life. At this moment in the ditch, he counts for the grandmother who truly cares about him. Were the Misfit to alleviate rather than increase his neighbor’s suffering, he could live by his fervor for justice and zeal for truth. In that interior place that will not be lied to, he could heed the call to “thow away everything and follow Him” (CW 152). Given his suppressed desire to follow Jesus, pulling the trigger in the gulch may be the Misfit’s last-ditch effort to parry the invasion of God in his life. This “spoiled prophet” (HB 465) has in his unbelief the power to be open toward faith and to go on to great things, both to announce doom and to effect return and reconciliation. Probably we have not seen the last of the Misfit. There is new terrain to be discovered.

GOD’S SWIFT MERCY

Moving on from the ditch of new knowledge about oneself to momentous duty is precisely the path Francis Marion Tarwater takes at the end of The Violent Bear It Away. The act of accepting his moral responsibility brings the unbeliever-protagonist of O’Connor’s second novel to the deepest ditch in her fiction. After a week’s rampage of scorning the dead, pyromania, blasphemy, murdering his young cousin, being raped, wandering, hungering, thirsting, and setting a final conflagration to assert ownership of Powderhead, Tennessee, the fourteen-year-old hero arrives at the grave of his great-uncle Mason Tarwater. The warpath of blind anger leads to the clarifying gaze of defeat. The very sight of the newly dug grave stuns Tarwater and crushes his ego. The boy learns that he did not cremate Mason and wipe out the prophetic demand the old man put on the boy. This awareness is a mere preliminary to the self-knowledge to come. The gravesite forces the proud
Tarwater to take in a vast subterranean realm. “Nothing seemed alive about the boy but his eyes and they stared downward at the cross as if they followed below the surface of the earth to where its roots encircled all the dead” (CW 477).

The main words in the Hebrew Bible for the abode of the dead are “the Ditch” and “the Pit.” The psalms repeatedly ask that one not be given over to Sheol and be forced to “see the Pit” (Psalm 16:10). Being spared “the pit of destruction” occasions Isaiah (38:17) to give thanks for the Lord's show of mercy. The biblical ditch arouses a range of emotions from ordinary apprehension to utter dread caused by imminent danger in the unknown, for the pit is dark, grimly silent, lifeless, and remote, lying beneath roots of mountains. This nethermost region of creation (Numbers 16:30) holds “the secret things” (Deuteronomy 29:29) belonging to God alone.

There are countless ways into Sheol. One entrance opens in the Tennessee backwoods. The scorched red earth of Powderhead splits asunder for Tarwater with interior sight to descend into life's genesis and consummation. O'Connor's hollow shares crucial features with the biblical crater. Both are repositories of the dead that hold a divine mystery instilling terror. The typical scriptural response sets the abode of the dead against the world of the living. After being healed, the psalmist asks rhetorically, “What profit is there in my life, if I go down to the Pit?” (Psalm 30:9). As we know from the encounter with death that concludes most of O'Connor's narratives, an awareness of mortality can give rise to faith. The ordeal the psalmist seeks to avoid is the trial to which O'Connor submits her teenage nihilist. Jonah, Tarwater's precursor, guides O'Connor. Not only does the great fish swallowing Jonah serve O'Connor as the model for Tarwater's being enveloped in the Detroit-bound auto-transit truck, O'Connor also configures the action according to Jonah's prayer of thanksgiving when he is released from the fish's belly after three days. “I went down to the land whose bars closed upon me for ever; / yet thou didst bring up my life from the Pit” (Jonah 2:6). The pit for the disobedient prophet is a school of remorse. Jonah in the pit learns the lessons of mercy and repentance to become a proclaimer of God's word despite himself. The preposterous little book of Jonah, replete with laughs at the prophet's expense, is very much O'Connor's affair. The reader can find something of Jonah's
comedy at the end of *The Violent Bear It Away* in the deflation of the boy’s grandiosity before Buford Munson, but for me the boy’s reading his own dark heart by the light from Mason’s grave solemnly opens an eschatological horizon of divine humor.

Unlike Jonah who rediscovers God’s mercy against a background of Hebrew belief, Tarwater experiences God’s power for the first time amid the godlessness of the modern age. Tarwater is the dark toxic age writ young and human. Heeding the culture, Tarwater aims to root out God from his life. Because the idea of responsibility to God threatens his human freedom, he must reject God to be free. To get rid of God, he must eradicate Mason’s teaching to live by and for God. That prophetic life begins with two duties. Tarwater must give Mason a Christian burial and he must baptize Bishop. Just as Motes’s unbelief arises as an attack on religious hypocrisy, and the Misfit’s unbelief is a reaction against unreason, Tarwater’s unbelief is a proxy for wiping out his great-uncle’s influence. For all three deniers, a certain psychology of unbelief supports its theology.

We know from “Good Country People” that mental snobbery and psychological need are more effective than books in educating a person to believe in nothing. This good country boy from Powderhead can skip graduate school and get straight to the job of burning Mason’s corpse. Cremation will refute the resurrection, and drowning Bishop will disprove at the source the need of God for new life. Whatever else stands in the way of his private will, Tarwater will obliterate with his trusty matches. A dead old man and a feeble child are surrogates to get at God, the real target. We see vividly in *The Violent Bear It Away* a decisive feature of O’Connor’s representation of unbelief. Throughout her fiction, unbelief is not an evolved intellectual position. Rather, unbelief is an event, a reaction against a belief or custom that is untenable, undesirable, or untrue to one’s willful experience of the world.

Given the soot and rubble left by Tarwater’s weeklong havoc, one expects, in O’Connor’s economy, that divine wrath will fall upon Tarwater. It does come but less as devastating a rebuke than as a lamentation. This grieving ritual brings the story to an end with particular emotional vitality. Like the grandmother in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Tarwater is in a state of mourning. His spirit’s coming to terms with loss over Mason’s death softens the heart. Tarwater’s belated fu-
nerary rite for Mason has none of the demand for vengeance or curse upon the enemy associated with cases of violence. On God’s side, the state of misfortune elicits consolation. On Tarwater’s part, admission of guilt is followed by acceptance of the need to compensate for not burying his protector-teacher Mason honorably. In this dialogue of lament at the gravesite, the prayer of the people of God is born; it is from here, the raising of the dead, that the hope for new and exalted life springs eternally, never separate from its source.

Nowhere is O’Connor’s writing more fully and imaginatively realized than in the final incandescent pages of *The Violent Bear It Away*. As the Powderhead woods burn away, an ardor of obedience ignites in Tarwater, the one who set the fire. Surrender makes each moment an event by virtue of the majestic calling at stake. From sundown to midnight, roughly four hours, a silent exchange ensues between the hidden God and the concealed desire in Tarwater to know Him, soundless voices echoing across time almost before memory. In response, Tarwater throws himself on the grave with his face in the dirt. Here the Lord smites Tarwater with forbearance. Leniency comes as a command heard in the blood of the flattened hero: “GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (*CW* 478). Tarwater is called to repent; and, in keeping with the biblical gesture of striking oneself as a pledge to atone, Tarwater smears dirt on his forehead (2 Samuel 1:2). The confession and forgiveness now running through his arteries and sinews embody permanently the message he must deliver with his burning tongue. The violent quality of mercy felt by Tarwater will issue a call to end violence, a message to be received or rejected by each individual liberty. The physical cost of being God’s instrument is staggering. Mercy abruptly grabs the soul to conduct the messenger’s body in following Him, readying the body to bear marks of suffering imposed on and from others. For all its munificence, the Lord’s mercy is challenging, adamant, terrible, and laden with peril. The recipients of divine tenderness are left with secret fissures beneath aching injuries.

Tarwater’s repeatedly victimized body, throbbing with tragic self-knowledge, serves as a mentor of his soul to move beyond the role of traumatized victim and to become a servant of the Lord. Pain teaches Tarwater that the world does not fit into the confines of his personal will or rationalizations. In the marrow of his adolescent bones he learns
that he has been seeking a god limited by his own limitations. But he has at least been seeking. Again, knowing that he is a sinner puts him in the acknowledged need of clemency. The supremacy of mercy precludes the possibility of seeking a rational understanding of God's dealings with the world. The knowledge of insufficiency gathers force in Tarwater's vision of Mason among the multitude at the messianic banquet. Of all the secrets God embeds in the sloping earth, the greatest is the mystery of the risen dead.

As passing observer of the synagogue of all being, Tarwater gets the answer to the question afflicting the Misfit. Whereas Jesus' returning to life throws “everything off balance” (CW 152) for the Misfit, for Tarwater Jesus’ raising the dead sets everything right. The dead still live. Jesus’ raising the dead is the crucial object of faith. Mason believes that world is made for the dead, and Tarwater’s vision illustrates the realization of the yearning for the fullness of life. Artistically, without a hint of coercive apologetics, O'Connor dramatizes the foundation of all human hope. God, Tarwater and the reader see, is always making creation new, unexpectedly new. The resurrection shows the future world and determines its perspective—not to say O'Connor’s culminating vision. And as the Misfit reasons, if Jesus raised the dead, “then it’s nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow Him” (152). Tarwater does that. At the end, O'Connor gives us death twice over: Mason's death, which opens into risen life, and the demise of Tarwater's false self. The passing away of Tarwater's old self prepares for the unexpectedly new spiritual reality of inner transformation, a new self within the shell of the old. Having learned to live with death at an early age, the boy henceforth must go by divine appointment even further to convey his vision of the dead being sustained by the bread of the living God.

Tarwater's experience and decision at the end are all about darkness, the dark of his plight, of faith, and its dangers. As Tarwater arrives at Mason's grave, the “encroaching dusk seemed to come softly in deference to some mystery that resided here” (CW 476). The scene fades “in the gathering darkness” (478). “By midnight” (478) the “boy’s jagged shadow” with eyes “black in their deep sockets” sets out “toward the dark city” (479). He will bring the sleeping children of God the message of mercy pounding in his blood. As only a diamond can cut a
diamond, so only the trusting dark of faith can slash Tarwater through the darkness of time and the weight of flesh. It taxes the imagination to consider what his victimized body, already suffering the harms done to and from others, will have to bear. The battered, but by no means diminished, fourteen-year-old must go where Motes first feared and then dared to tread. Both do accept the invitation of the “wild ragged” figure of Jesus to “come off into the dark” (CW 11) unsure of their footing. In the dark they might unknowingly walk on water, but “suddenly know it and drown” (11), which is to say that in dark faith one either advances or perishes. The lack of certainty expresses the need for and power of faith. Put another way, mystery for O’Connor is the dark moral of faith and the strength of faith. With Hazel Motes and the Misfit before him, Tarwater’s inchoate belief entails endless struggle, especially against the human inclination to put one’s personal desire above the needs of others and the will of God. And if we happen to observe Tarwater up close, setting off to his future in the city, as we tracked Motes going to meet his fate out of the city, we would see that there is no wiping away from Tarwater’s seared eyes the knowledge of death, as well as the fresh understanding of the risen life that that knowledge gives.

All of these spiritual implications come to the reader unobtrusively. The Violent Bear It Away is discreetly orchestrated, as O’Connor is content to have simple action show the theological aura. In calling the ending a lamentation, I want also to suggest the spare liturgical artistry informing her best fiction. Craft this ending has; power it commandingly sends forth. The sorrow occasioning the lamentation lies not only in Tarwater’s nihilistic plundering but also in the larger cultural narrative spanning the fourteen years of his life from 1938 to 1952. The period witnessed the slaughter of over sixty million people in World War II, the ravages of nuclear explosions, the satans swarming America instigating the massacre of innocents, scorning the dead and the light, and the helplessness of society and politics to redress these evils. Neither reason nor doctrine helps Tarwater. But concentrated in O’Connor’s lament is the conviction that belief springs from the ruins of individual human evil and political annihilation. This grieving belief affirms the responsibility for sin, the disciplinary value of suffering, and the absolute mercy of God for which patience is needed to absorb its deep healing. God’s purposes, grounded as they
are in dark recesses of his hidden love, may be inscrutable, but in story after story O'Connor shows Him to be reliable. The habits of compassion and worship that O'Connor does not find in daily life can be found in the liturgical practice of her art that expresses the need humankind has of a creator upon whom a person can entirely depend.

**CALLED OUT OF DARKNESS INTO GOD’S WONDERFUL LIGHT**

For each descender into the dark ditch of unbelief O'Connor provides a lamp to guide the way into God’s wonderful light. Dante has stars at the end of each canticle conducting the wayfarer from “the lowest pit of the universe” (“l’inﬁma lacuna de l’universo inﬁn,” *Paradiso* 33.22–23) to the unmoved mover’s supreme light (“somma etterna,” *Paradiso* 33.66). O’Connor, following her master-teacher, unseals a living ray to bid the unbeliever out of the dark cavity of our age. From the tiniest spark to starry pyrotechnics, O’Connor’s light shines enjoining the blind, willfully blind, and clueless seeker to look upward. Sightless as he is, Motes ebbs “farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light” (*CW* 131). This supernatural light acquires plain human form in the radiance of the smiling grandmother’s face that directs the Misfit to hope. A lacerating beam suits the flint-hearted teenage prophet. As a lamp, O’Connor provides Tarwater the “diamond-bright” (*CW* 479) companion of the “moon, riding low above the field beside him” (478). I use the word *lamp* deliberately to underscore again the liturgical mode imbuing O’Connor’s art. In biblical times the lamp was kept burning, partly because a house had little daylight and mainly because the lamp was hard to light. The poorest home maintained a lamp. Its extinction signaled disaster. By reason of its light, the lamp signiﬁed the living presence of humankind and of God. Israel keeps a lamp lit in the sanctuary (Exodus 27:20). God requires still more. The servant of God must let light shine forth in the midst of an evil world.

O’Connor, not one to hide her lamp beneath a bushel (Matthew 5:15), artistically serves as witness to the true light (John 1:7) in our
dark night by keeping lit the wick of glory located in the pin point until the end of time. Besides mentioning the lamps lit for the three unbelievers previously discussed, I cannot help taking the sheer pleasure of gazing skyward to revisit the “gigantic white clouds illuminated like lanterns” (CW 230) honoring Mr. Head’s insupportable agony of feeling love restored with his grandson Nelson in “The Artificial Nigger.” There’s no telling where, how, and for whom the incandescence will ignite. One would be remiss not to cite the signature O’Connorian transfiguring light flashed by the peacock. Though Mrs. McIntyre’s eyesight is deteriorating at the end of “The Displaced Person,” the peacock still struts around the empty place— forlorn and neglected as Motes’s vacant lot—for all to see its tail lift from the ground out of the blue and fluoresce into a celestial comet emitting a radiant stream “of fierce planets with eyes that were each ringed in green and set against a sun that was gold in one second’s light and salmon-colored in the next” (CW 290). Like Edward Hopper, with his painterly evocations of transcendence in empty American settings, O’Connor is an artist of light in forlorn native places. Star, sun, moon, bird tail, emblazoned ice, luminous tree line, or enflamed tattoo, wherever O’Connor sees brightness she seems to associate God with the idea of light approaching the mind.

That such a beacon of beauty and being glistens in the age of endarkenment for the unseeing, unfaithful Mrs. McIntyre and even for the most treacherous killers makes a case for O’Connor’s distinctive cultural criticism that further argues for the capacious quality of her Christianity. After the war, the United States proudly celebrated its defeat of European fascism and imperial Japanese aggression. Americans commemorated the triumph by embarking on the greatest economic expansion in our history. O’Connor, however, did not mistake victory for peace. Nor did she confuse material prosperity with fulfillment. She knew that the satanic forces driving the war were not overcome by the vaunted American way of life, much less by pious ecclesiastical admonitions. The battle is local, personal, and interior. In Wise Blood, she observes the war that many so proudly hailed as just and honorable from a very different angle than that of patriotic zeal. Astute social historian that she is, O’Connor looks at the war and its aftermath from the
bottom up. Ignoring treaties, alliances, propaganda, material prosperity, and global politics, she focuses on country people and their culture to see what is happening. They too, the reader finds out, inhabit the jet dark abyss into which World War II plunged the modern world.

Neither geography nor spiritual struggle protects one from the lethal current of the time: “if you live today you breathe in nihilism.” The fumes from God’s death detected by Nietzsche’s keen nose a century earlier flow in the modern century. The toxin not only fuels and emits from the Buchenwald ovens; the vapor trail circulates in religious institutions as well. “In or out of the Church, it’s the gas you breathe” (HB 97). Religious unbelievers and those for whom God is dead are O’Connor’s heroes and heroines. Her readers also inhale the contaminant. “My audience are the people who think God is dead,” she explains. “At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for” (92). Her mature, persevering faith accounts for the depth of her identification with those who think God is dead.

O’Connor examines unbelief as she looked at World War II, which is to say from the bottom up. Her church, hierarchy that it is, would typically consider belief and unbelief from the top down, regarding unbelievers as caricatures, misfits. Whereas the institutional mind looks at atheism censoriously through an order of rules, obediences, and chastisements that protects its century-old authority, O’Connor’s view is from the dark base of the drainage ditch. The unbeliever is not the enemy to be persuaded or proselytized (certainly not to be burned at the stake). Far from being rigid or dogmatic, she is theologically progressive in date and daring. O’Connor is a religious writer who has the courage to think and feel beyond conventional categories. O’Connor’s belief in God confers belief in herself as artist and person and woman of faith. As one might expect of a person who finds her identity in God, O’Connor’s self-assurance comes through without smugness. She operates, rather, from a humility that leaves room for the unbeliever to live within her. Embraced as worthy, the unbeliever is the veiled face of the believer’s identity. Openhearted, O’Connor enters nonbelievers’ experience sympathetically disposed to their authentic motives and to the human integrity driving those who deny God. O’Connor imbras her unbelievers, however perverse or silly, with great humanity, visible even through monstrous evil. As she surrounds the poor and weak
with grace, so she encircles unbelievers with divine benevolence. Some enjoy a certain charisma. This is the case with Hazel Motes, the Misfit, and Francis Marion Tarwater.

This nuanced portrayal of unbelievers benefits from O’Connor’s familiarity with Thomas Aquinas’s writing. “The more I read St. Thomas,” she observes on 28 August 1955, “the more flexible he appears to me” (HB 97). Thomas’s expansive theology encourages believers to respect those who disagree with them about God because nonbelievers are also after the truth concerning the creator. O’Connor does Thomas one better. Seeing herself in the other, O’Connor investigates unbelief as one way to God. In writing from inside the experience, she makes a compelling art of its murky labyrinthine passages. As the Heraclitean way down meets the way up, so unbelief in the O’Connor world functions as one coordinate in the continuum of belief. From that position of rejection and abandonment, her unbelievers are witnesses malgré eux to the holiness of creation.

**MAKING IT IN DARKNESS**

Whether one believes or does not believe, seeking necessitates struggle. Because God is shrouded in mystery, O’Connor can more readily understand how the temptation to distrust confronts believers in a way that can be salutary. Such doubts constitute the dark night for those needing to deepen their faith. This darkness strips the believer’s heart bare. It tears away the pretensions and excuses and inevitably flawed images of God. We have only to skim the amusing book of divine figures that the tattoo artist offers O. E. Parker in “Parker’s Back” to catch some of the countless imperfect pictures we make of the divine to satisfy callow optimism. The rending of these false images can be beneficial for faith, since it is at the very heart of misery, the dark night, that God’s mercy reveals itself.

The dark night benefits unbelief by revealing the denial of God to be a belief. O’Connor’s nonbelievers identify themselves with their invalidation of any truth all the while they hold fast to the certainty of their denial. There is no real world, but the denial of it has meaning. God is a pretense, but God’s death is actual. By virtue of sharing in “the
modern consciousness” (*HB* 90), O’Connor is perhaps in a good position with her sense of the dark night of absence to offer hope in the God who is inaccessible to human concepts. In holding God as mystery, O’Connor sees God as beyond all being. Mystery in her art pertains to God’s sovereignty.

The power of O’Connor’s treatment of unbelief lies in her ability to infuse her nihilists with the intensity and struggle of her own faith. The validity of spiritual seeking is in the struggle. She avoids spelling out the dogma anchoring her own belief. When she deals with the driest doctrinal considerations, they come to the reader as seen for the first time in the lived experience of dramatic action. The presentation is natural and suffused with the risk of longing for the infinite by the half-light of desire, as is the poignant case of little Harry Ashfield’s baptismal drowning in “The River.” With the child’s heart-smashing suicide, O’Connor gets under our skin to tear us apart and then put us back together. She makes us feel, not analyze, the rush of life in the sacrament of watery immersion. The emotions that belong to religion—terror, consolation, and elation—can be felt in this art. Given the opacity of God and the limited human mind seeking the concealed God, there is, in O’Connor’s own words, “no satisfactory answer at all, no assurance at all” (*HB* 92) to the question of faith. How can there be certainty in the pursuit of the hidden God? “I can only say with Peter,” O’Connor writes, “Lord I believe, help my unbelief” (92). Clearly, O’Connor’s personal doubts worked for her artistically. Darkness of interior trial and fear of suffering are essential to the charisma of her vision and to her work, an art of sacred intent. With her characters, O’Connor struggles in the dark of faith. The violence defining O’Connor’s art expresses her understanding that the great effort for faith is not won without keen suffering. Wise or unwise—or in the case of the grandmother, foolish and trusting—the price to pay is the heart’s blood.

O’Connor’s dark night and dark faith fall under the shadow cast by the cross. In Matthew’s account we read that “from the sixth hour there was darkness over all the land until the ninth hour,” which is to say from our noon to 3 p.m., at which time Jesus cries in a loud voice, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). Abandoned by the Father, Jesus as he dies is left in the void of nothingness and in the dark night of the spirit. When we realize that these groaning
words begin Psalm 22, the experience of nothingness acquires fuller meaning. Psalm 22 cries of trust in the God who protected the psalmist’s fathers and has drawn the psalmist from the mother’s womb. Deliverance brackets abandonment. An exclamation of joy and hope concludes the psalm: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; / and all the families of the nations shall worship before him” (Psalm 22:27).

Emptiness opens the way to fullness. This nothingness is everything. O’Connor, in a letter of 4 February 1961 to Elizabeth Hester, expresses the experience with arresting candor. Her enlightening comment comes with deep simplicity: “I measure God by everything that I am not. I begin with that” (HB 430). O’Connor begins where Psalm 22 ends. To gauge God by one’s becoming nothing is to rise joyfully to fulfillment. Descent precedes ascent as nothing to everything and death to resurrection. O’Connor finds this motif in Dante and major enlightenments of the mystics. O’Connor’s fictions fling us into the ditch to stare into the dark of our insufficiency and dependence wherein lies the injunction calling us out of darkness into God’s wonderful light. The power to respond to that directive goes beyond reasoning and thinking. Faith is impervious to the rational mind. In struggling with unreason and doubt we can integrate ourselves. This tension gathers us together to make us whole. We rediscover the movement in O’Connor’s stories of faith in our age of endarkenment. All faith is dark. For God, who is incomprehensible, is like the dark to the human spirit.

O’Connor makes us aware of the impenetrable darkness that the object of faith is for our intelligence. We understand nothing; we simply believe. With Motes, the Misfit, and Tarwater, cliffhangers all, we hover over an abyss adhering only to the fine thread of God’s promise. Among those suspended in unbelief and dereliction, O’Connor finds her bearings. Through this preoccupation with the themes of pain and hurtling confusion, with difference and reconciliation, she comes to understand much about the soul. Whatever the greatness of O’Connor’s art may be called, it is present in her narratives of unbelieving seekers; and as is so often the case, that power lies in concealed spiritual extensions that touch us. Flannery O’Connor is the sister of those who have no faith, who eat the bread of sorrow, who are making it in darkness by yearning for the creator of darkness, and who meet in exile.
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WORKS CITED


