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Parables of Suffering: Violence and the Prodigal Son of Flannery O'Connor's Novels

Were it printed as a blurb on a dust jacket, it might be mistaken for a summary of one of Chuck Palahnuik's novels: a young man, newly discharged from the army, strikes out for the city, where he experiments with mortal sin and becomes a street preacher for atheism, after which he murders a lookalike, blinds himself with quicklime, and is beaten to death by the police. Similarly, the following seems quite at home in a review of a Quentin Tarantino film: a fourteen-year-old boy, raised by a backwoods fanatic to become a prophet, runs away, torments his uncle, simultaneously baptizes and murders his retarded cousin, and, on his way home, is robbed and raped by the devil himself. The recent popularity of so-called torture porn movies like *Hostel* and its aptly-titled sequel, *Hostel Part II*, as well as violent video games and novels like Palahniuk's certainly makes it seem plausible that the two summaries could fit into our contemporary culture of arts and entertainment—a culture in which we study violence by seeing its extremity. What should surprise us, then, isn't so much the content of the novels bearing these summaries but rather the identity and purpose of their author—a terminally ill, devoutly Roman Catholic, Georgian woman in the mid-twentieth century, who believed the violence of her work was a positive thing. Her stories were not, despite popular secular interpretation, indictments of violence and religious fanaticism like some of the aforementioned works, but rather parables, reinterpreted from those of the Bible. What her two novels present, then, is the

parable of the prodigal son revisited, or, rather, transported to Flannery O'Connor's unique literary landscape and given new life in the shocking brutality of her voice.

O'Connor considered herself primarily a religious author, and the parable as a literary device would have served her purposes for writing excellently. "The parables of Jesus," John May, Alumni Professor of English and Religious Studies at Louisiana State University, reminds us, "were not allegories but dramatic narratives involving conflicts between human beings that symbolize rather than describe man's relationship to ultimate reality" (14). He ascribes the effectiveness of a parable to its use of "ordinary human language rather than specifically theological terms," something which O'Connor seemed to value in her own work, which was aimed, we must remember, at an audience she assumed did not already share her religious views. The parable would also have given her resistant implied audience an advantage of their own, for, as May writes, its "indirect appeal…provides the hardened of heart with an excuse for not understanding" (15). Thus, constructing her stories as parables would have satisfied O'Connor's desire to write with the intention of converting rather than informing while also appealing to her cynical opinion of those readers not easily swayed by her message.

We find further evidence of O'Connor's interest in the parable as serving both these functions in the novel *Wise Blood* itself, which features two distinct parables-within-a-parable. During Hazel Motes's first confrontation with Asa Hawks and his daughter, Sabbath Lily abruptly breaks into telling a parable about a woman who, after trying unsuccessfully to get rid of her baby, decides to kill it only to be haunted by its image. This story—somewhat of a reversal of the prodigal son parable—prompts an ambiguous response from Hazel: "'My Jesus,' Haze muttered" (WB 48). We might interpret in his simple reaction both wonder and revulsion, as at this point in the novel, Hazel embodies the duality of O'Connor's anticipated audience.

When he takes Sabbath Lily out to the woods she once again, as if by sudden divine inspiration, tells a story about a grandmother whom "the least good thing made…break out in these welps." Tortured by the presence of her virtuous grandchild, she finally hangs herself over a well. Both the sexually-minded Sabbath Lily and the blasphemous Hazel fail to grasp the significance of this new parable, however, and the moment its telling is finished they both turn to other subjects (120-1). In this scene the couple truly represents those whom Jesus, when explaining his insistence on using parables, speaks of in Matt. 13:13, who "seeing see not; and hearing…hear not, neither do they understand."

Recognizing the potential of a parable to be either misunderstood or simply ignored, O'Connor embedded within her parables a device that would drive her messages home for her readers, no matter where they stood in religious belief—extreme violence. In her essay "The Fiction Writer and His Country," she advises that, when addressing the "hostile" modern reader to whom "distortions" of the truth are "natural," the writer "may well be forced to take more violent means to get his vision across" (MM 33-4). Her reinterpretations of the biblical parables, then, see the most innocuous elements turned into violence and mayhem. For example, in the case of *The Violent Bear It Away*, a "hostile" reader might easily look away from a prophet receiving a vision in a burning bush, dismissing it as mere religious sensationalism, but will have a much harder time doing so if that prophet set the bush on fire himself to burn the site of a rape. Similarly, anyone reading *Wise Blood* with even the slightest exposure to Christian culture—something which is almost impossible to avoid in today's global society—will most likely pick up from the repetitive references to eyes and blindness the idea of men who "seeing see not," but when that idea is illustrated by a man pouring a chemical solution into his eyes to gain real sight, even the most secular reader will pay attention.

Violence was not an arbitrary choice of vehicle for her message, nor did O'Connor select it simply to be shocking—for her, violence, even the rape of a teenaged boy or the murder of an innocent doppelganger, carries a religious significance. "In [her] world," writes Claire Kahane, Professor English at the University of Buffalo, "the environment becomes a projection of sadistic impulses and fears so strong that the dissolution of the ego's power, ultimately death, is the only path to safety. Paradoxically, to be destroyed is to be saved" (61). Any pain a character endures is meant to bring him closer to God and to salvation.

The process of violence-as-salvation may begin, as we see in her two novels, with strict—though not always self-imposed—asceticism: Hazel Motes blinds himself so that he might see and Tarwater unwillingly starves himself so that he might eat the bread of life. In addition to the harm they inflict upon their own bodies, her characters must also inflict it upon those around them in order to be redeemed. In these parables, O'Connor presents a God who requires violence from His servants and who will in turn meet their actions with a divine violence of His own. The novels' protagonists, both prodigals from the Lord, must commit acts of violence before they can begin their journey back to God. To O'Connor, these acts of verbal and physical abuse, culminating in death, are reflections of the "violence of rejection [of God] in the modern world," which "demands an equal violence of redemption—man needs to be 'struck' by mercy" in the most violent manner possible, be that a murder, a rape, or even, as in the case of her short story "Greenleaf," impalement on a bull's horns (Shinn 58). Her characters must become victims themselves to truly fulfill the message of her parables. To recognize the God they are meant to serve, her prophets- and preachers-in-denial must experience firsthand physical and spiritual suffering, for suffering is "the preliminary to salvation," and propels her characters

from "their hell on earth to a purgatory which prepares them for Paradise" (68). What they mete out to others God will inevitably return to them, and only then might they attain redemption.

The true point of O'Connor's infusion of violence into her parables is its necessity in receiving grace. André Bleikasten of the University of Strasbourg quite effectively defines O'Connor's brand of grace as "God's violence responding to Satan's violence, divine counterterror fighting the mutiny of evil" (153). If grace is required for man's salvation, then when applied to O'Connor's novels, grace grants human suffering a deeper significance—it simultaneously makes a character's life truly unbearable while indicating his growing relationship with God. Indeed, as we see in examining her novels as new parables of the prodigal son, those characters who do not in some way suffer are denied spiritual communion. We might look at Rayber's reaction to his son's murder in *The Violent Bear It Away* for an illustration of the danger of a life without suffering:

> He stood waiting for the raging pain, the intolerable hurt that was his due, to begin, so that he could ignore it, but he continued to feel nothing. He stood light-headed at the window and it was not until he realized there would be no pain that he collapsed (203).

Rayber's inability to feel any pain at all "illustrates his severance from God…[confining him] to the painless emptiness of Limbo and [denying] him the purifying pain of Purgatory" (Shinn 72). The same can be said of Asa Hawks in *Wise Blood*, who, failing to properly blind himself with quicklime as he promised, is forced into the life of a charlatan and beggar, and even then fails to suffer.

Grace ignores both the openly virtuous and the passive, coming instead "at the climax of violence." Referring to the same scene involving Rayber, Bleikasten writes, "It is when

Tarwater yields to the temptation of murder and drowns Rayber's son that the hand of God falls upon him, forcing him to baptize the child against his will, and so converting the moment of sin and death into one of rebirth for both murderer and victim" (152). Haunted by the legacy of his great-uncle and the God the man represented, Tarwater commits murder but in doing so falls under the terrible grace of God, becoming at once a murderer and a baptizer, while his victim is removed from an atheistic worldly father and given to a heavenly one. This phenomenon of duality occurs first in *Wise Blood*, when Hazel, in hearing Solace Layfield's confession, performs both the functions of murderer and confessor, fulfilling O'Connor's truly Catholic ideals.

Before examining the novels in terms of the parable of the prodigal son, we should first take into account the differences between the popular Catholic and Protestant interpretations of the parable. The key difference lies in the issue of forgiveness. During the Reformation a dramatic split can be seen in the way the two denominations viewed forgiveness: for Protestants, "forgiveness is not contingent upon the performance of particular acts," while "the Catholic argument [is] that the prodigal atoned for his sins through penance, thereby meriting his father's forgiveness" (Haeger 128). Catholic thought accepts the necessity of divine grace in the prodigal's forgiveness, but, unlike the Protestant interpretation, maintains that the prodigal had to earn that grace through his actions. The prodigal is not immediately forgiven and purged of his sins, but rather becomes a "penitent sinner," on his way to receiving forgiveness by doing constant penance (133). The Church's Decree on Penance, issued in 1551 and still valid at the time when O'Connor finished her novels, held "the benefits of Christ's death [are] applied to those who have fallen under the power of sin and the devil; through penance, sinners may obtain grace and justice." The sinner is "dead," but can be made to live again through acts of penance

(136), a motif certainly present in *Wise Blood*. The penitent sinner does not necessarily choose the works he will perform; indeed, a great deal of his penance must see him submitting to agents of suffering over which he has no control. The Catechism itself states that "penance requires…the sinner to endure all things willingly, be contrite of heart, confess with the lips, and practice complete humility and fruitful satisfaction" (Article VII.1450).

The prodigal son has been featured among the popular "penitent sinners" of Catholic mindset dating all the way back to the Council of Trent (Haeger 138), and in considering the Catholic interpretation of the necessity of the son's penance, we begin to see how O'Connor applied her religious ideal to her own version of the parable. What makes her treatment of the prodigal son most striking—and when compared to other modern treatments, important in terms of literary canon—is her unique representation of penance and the manner in which grace accompanies it. In O'Connor's two novels, grace comes in the form of extreme violence through which the prodigal must pass before he can be forgiven and be once more accepted by his Father (lacking an earthly father, both Hazel Motes and Francis Tarwater mentally and spiritually replace him with God). The works that show his penitence are equally violent, in both novels including murder. Indeed, the very act of murder is what propels both characters back toward "home," whether that home is still a physical place for them or simply a mental plane. Hazel Motes and Tarwater sin in violence, but they also work to earn redemption through violence, and finding their violence acceptable, the Lord metes out violence of his own to test their penitence as they, like the prodigal of the biblical parable, come stumbling back to him.

As it appears in Luke 15, the parable of the prodigal son leaves much room for O'Connor to work her hand. The closest thing to violence occurring in it is the brother's verbal outburst at perceiving the prodigal to be favored above him, and the only death is that of the fatted calf. The

prodigal's rejection of his father at the parable's beginning hardly counts as rejection at all, for he simply takes the money his father has given him and leaves. In the city, the prodigal squanders his inheritance on "riotous living" (Luke 15:13), but the other parties to his sin, prostitutes and wicked men, never appear so that we may see the extent of the prodigal's fall from righteousness. When famine overcomes the city, the prodigal never seems to actually suffer, and the servitude into which he enters—the servitude, we must note, that inspires him to go home—seems to involve no real abuse. His penance comes through apology and humility, but nothing as dark as what O'Connor required of her characters.

Cleverly disguised by O'Connor's unique treatment, every essential element of the parable is present in her novels. Hazel Motes leaves the home of his religious upbringing and in doing so, leaves behind the legacy of his devout grandfather and his Heavenly Father. He goes to the city, where he immerses himself in sin. His mental return home begins long before he himself realizes it, and his reluctant passion for his discarded faith grows. The simple Enoch Emery comes to represent the prodigal's brother who doesn't understand why he isn't the favored one (here with both God and women), and Solace Layfield takes the place of the calf whose sacrifice marks the entrance of divine grace in Hazel's life. After the destruction of his car, Hazel begins his physical penance by blinding himself and performing acts of self-mortification. He cannot physically go home to his dead grandfather, but when the Lord finds Hazel's penance acceptable, He moves again to call Hazel home to his true Father. Likewise, Tarwater runs away from home and from his great-uncle's charge on him, fleeing to the city to take up with his atheist uncle, Rayber. Rayber, a prodigal himself who has tried to go home to Powderhead only to be deemed incapable of feeling penitence and thus unworthy of grace, becomes the jealous brother, for despite his denunciations of the family religion, the text

suggests he secretly envies Tarwater's call to fulfill Mason's legacy. Rayber's innocent and dim-witted son Bishop, in turn, becomes the fatted calf; after killing him, Tarwater physically begins the walk home that he mentally embarked on days before. There Tarwater will find God's grace in the form of extreme violence.

Wise Blood opens with the prodigal's first return home after being discharged from the army. His physical home in Eastrod, Tennessee, however, isn't truly the home from which he tries to flee; rather, as his memories of home in the first chapter reveal, what he wants to escape is God Himself, represented in Hazel's austere mother and his grandfather, "a circuit preacher…who had ridden over three counties with Jesus hidden in his head like a stinger" (WB 14). The grandfather, as previously noted, often becomes interchangeable with God, and in Hazel's mind, they may as well be one and the same. Like Luke's prodigal, Haze takes his only inheritance from his dead family in Eastrod—a handful of oppressive memories and an unfulfilled legacy to hang over his head—and, having rejected their religion and his own calling to follow in his grandfather's footsteps, heads for the city. But physical abandonment isn't enough to rid him of his calling, for he "is a man with an [sic] hereditary obsession: he is congenitally infected…with the legacy of his grandfather" (Muller 24). O'Connor, we see here, has wasted no time in beginning her violent reinterpretation of the parable, for while the prodigal Hazel's earthly father figure (his actual father, we find out from his memories, having been a hypocrite) is dead, he and the God he represented will follow Haze wherever he goes, reminding him constantly of what he has rejected.

In any O'Connor story, the city is a place of vice and corruption, with physical and spiritual temptations lurking about every corner. The city of Taulkinham is inherently secular, so much so that Hazel's message of blasphemy will go largely unnoticed, and those who do listen to

his sermons can't recognize the difference between the Christian church and Haze's Church Without Christ. Within minutes of his arrival there, Haze is greeted with the same temptation to which the biblical prodigal succumbed, but here, in keeping with O'Connor's juxtaposition of the spirituality of the country against the anti-spirituality of the city, the method in which that temptation presents itself takes on a religious significance. The graffito on the bathroom door advertising the services of Mrs. Leora Watts satisfies Haze's need to completely reject his old religion, for "he interprets [it] as a personal sign…a type of forced false destiny by Hazel Motes" instead of God (Lee 215). Mrs. Watts, in turn, replaces Haze's mother, the figure who inspired his first experiment with penance and self-mortification, when she not only becomes the first person to accept his denial of being a preacher but also refers to herself as his "Momma" (WB 30). All replacements necessary for his new life made, Haze spends his first night in Taulkinham in Leora Watts's bed, thereby losing both money and sexual innocence in the mode of Luke's prodigal.

To continue following the pattern of his biblical predecessor, Haze must now continue losing money. He carelessly throws money away on a potato-peeler to give to Sabbath Lily Hawks, who will become his next and most spiritually-draining whore. She, too, has a religious significance, for upon receiving the "new jesus" from Enoch Emery, instead of giving it first to its intended recipient, Haze, she takes it for herself and calls it her child, making of herself a kind of anti-Mary. It's no coincidence that this scene reveals Haze at last putting aside all replacements of his mother, and wearing her glasses for the first time since he was in the army and still resistant to sin, he exclaims that he has seen "the only truth there is" (189), signifying the beginning of his reluctant mental return to Eastrod.

But while O'Connor's father-God isn't yet physically violent, He is still spiritually violent, and His inescapable, haunting nature ensures there are signs to counteract Haze's rejection. After his escape from Eastrod, Haze immediately encounters the sign of his grandfather's (and God's) mark on him. Despite his vehement denials, he cannot avoid his own face and demeanor, for "[d]estiny has shaped his features and his character in the mold of his grandfather, and whomever he meets believes he too is a preacher" (Lee 211). The driver who delivers him to Leora Watts's house refuses to accept Haze's refutations and even the "blind" Asa Hawks confronts him pointedly with the recognition of God's sign: "Some preacher has left his mark on you…Did you follow for me to take it off or give you another one?" (WB 47). Haze rages against his own identity but to no avail. In his outrage he creates the Church Without Christ, and preaches his antichristian message from the hood of his car, an exact mirror of his grandfather's method of preaching. "In his attempt to escape Jesus [represented by his grandfather]," Jill P. Baumgaertner, Professor of English and Dean of Humanities and Theological Studies at Wheaton College, writes, "he has not put any distance at all between them" (125). Unable to combat his paternal legacy with words, Haze will eventually be forced to act out in the violence that will expedite the Lord's grace.

Haze's paycheck from the army won't allow him, unlike the biblical prodigal, to go completely financially broke, but the inescapable Father takes a toll on him, leaving him spiritually and mentally bereft. His Church Without Christ gathers no followers, save the would-be disciple Enoch Emery, whom Haze violently rejects. His fixation on the seemingly ascetic Asa Hawks ends after a late-night break-in, during which Haze learns that Hawks never went through with his promise to blind himself for Jesus and which proves the street preacher a hypocrite no longer worthy of Haze's admiration. His relationship with sexually-minded

Sabbath Lily sours when the girl can no longer offer Haze a mortal sin with which he hasn't already experimented, and her presence becomes more of an annoyance to him than an affirmation of his secularism. He finally receives the new jesus his church has needed from Enoch Emery but rejects it, too, and turning once more to his mother's glasses, Haze, now fully aligned again to the Biblical prodigal, realizes the poverty of his condition.

His mental return home necessitates the active role of the Father. The Father, now fully God and without need of representation by Haze's grandfather, anticipates His son's return and calls for the death of the fatted calf. O'Connor's violent treatment of the parable here requires that the death come in the form of murder. Haze, the "true heir" of the Motes family's call to Christ (Lawson 138), must atone for rejecting his call, and the murder he commits is a sacrifice to God instead of the meat of celebration.

"Up to this point," writes David Eggenschwiler, Associate Professor of Modern and Contemporary Literature at the University of Southern California,

> Haze has been a failure in his attempts to turn his self-sacrificial impulses toward others. In each of his abortive efforts to be physically or verbally aggressive, he has ended up a victim, manipulated by the prostitutes, policemen, and hucksters who are more naturally sadistic than he is (111).

His need for violence, however, now has a deeper spiritual purpose, and guided by the Father, that need leads him to the one character who cannot in any way get the best of him. Solace Layfield, the consumptive prophet chosen by the charlatan Hoover Shoats and Haze's doppelganger, serves the purpose of the fatted calf. The Essex, the car from which Haze has preached his anti-gospel, becomes not only a pulpit but a murder weapon as Haze runs the fleeing man down. Dying, Solace Layfield begins confessing to Haze the sins of his youth. As

previously noted, here in the novel's first murder scene, we see the two conflicted sides of Haze manifested at once as he tries to silence his victim while simultaneously given audience to his every word: "'You shut up,' Haze said, leaning his head closer to hear the confession" (WB 207). By staying until absolutely certain that Solace Layfield has said his last, Haze takes a step in fulfilling the role from which he has fled for so long—he becomes a confessor and, like Tarwater in his baptism/murder of Bishop, an intermediary between God and man, facilitating their union.

Even after his sacrifice, Haze hasn't yet met the requirement of humility. Just as the biblical prodigal relies on his money and the accompanying notion of self-sufficiency until he is stricken down by poverty, Haze believes the Essex might still offer him an escape from God: "the murder of the false prophet seems to set him free to preach his gospel in another city unmolestedly" (Stelzmann 14). The fatted calf having been given to God, the Father must now meet His son's violence with violence of His own in order to bring His son home. The Essex has been falling apart since Haze purchased it, but not until it has been used to "sacrifice" Solace Layfield does any authority take note of it as a hazard; indeed, up until this point, others have called Haze's awareness to its dilapidated condition, but no one has voiced concern for the danger it poses on the road. For the violence needed to truly humble Haze and make him worthy of grace, another agent must be enlisted, a demonic figure to turn Haze back toward a heavenly one. Nothing in the text suggests the policeman who pulls Haze over is a servant of God—indeed, like the stranger who rapes Tarwater in *The Violent Bear It Away* and who is the physical manifestation of the devil himself, he seems quite the opposite. His explanation for harassing Haze—"'I just don't like your face'" (WB 210)—recalls every other character's insistence that Haze looks like a preacher. But even if we are to infer that the officer, too, is an agent of

darkness, he is nonetheless put to God's purposes here, just as Tarwater's rapist is. When he destroys the Essex and forces Haze to watch, the officer essentially robs Haze of the last of his pride and self-reliance, leaving him subject no longer to his own will but to that of the Father to whom he must now return.

Unlike Luke's prodigal and, later, Tarwater, Haze cannot physically go home to Eastrod. He has no mission there, and nothing waits for him but an old chifforobe. But the soul goes where the body cannot, and with the Essex destroyed, Haze realizes what he must do to leave Taulkinham behind spiritually. On his way back to Mrs. Flood's house, he stops to buy a bucket and a bag of quicklime, which he mixes into a solution immediately after his arrival. In a stark contrast to Asa Hawks, Haze does not advertise what he intends to do for the Lord; when Mrs. Flood inquires as to what he means to do with his purchases, Haze replies simply "'Blind myself'" (212) and moments later makes good on his answer. The pattern of sacrilegious signs is reversed with this new act of self-mortification, as "in fulfillment of Hawks's broken vow to blind himself in witness to Jesus, Haze becomes the sign that in hope and dread he so long looked for" (Asals 54). He knows he is not the prophet of a new Church Without Christ but a prodigal to the church of his family; he still refuses to preach and thus become his grandfather all over again, but he has at last consented to follow and obey his Father. Blinded, he makes a new series of replacements, in which Taulkinham disappears and Eastrod once again surrounds him. Haze isolates himself from the outside world in order to "recreate a permanent Eastrod in his imagination" (Kessler 31). He has no purpose anywhere in the city, as his aimless walks prove, and his habit of walking in place in Mrs. Flood's house indicates his entrapment in his mental Eastrod (32). He continues to do nothing, speaking only when spoken to and even then only briefly, answering what he's been asked and elaborating as little as possible. He proves his

existence in an Eastrod where only he and Mrs. Flood's house exist when he claims, in response to Mrs. Flood's accusation that he's leaving, "'There's no other house nor no other city'" (WB 232).

While Haze hasn't yet earned the most extreme form of grace, that being death and acceptance into full communion with God, he seems assured he's on the right path. His self-mortifications progress from blinding himself to, as he did when he was a child, walking in shoes filled with rocks, to keeping strands of barbed wire wrapped about his chest. He tells Mrs. Flood clearly that he does it all "'to pay'" (226); he clearly means to do penance, and is only waiting for his Father to deem his penance sufficient. The Father's acceptance of Haze's actions and reward of violent grace comes to Haze in the form of an illness that overtakes him during his disappearance from Mrs. Flood's house and the policemen who, finding his unconscious body, beat him to death. His soul makes the return home that his body has been denied, as John May explains: when Mrs. Flood says "'I see you've come home'…the only meaning she can possibly attach to her exclamation is a literal one, but for the reader who knows that Haze is dead, the literal reading is hardly sufficient" (128). Penance-through-violence and submission have at last allowed the prodigal son and his Father to be reunited.

Young Tarwater of *The Violent Bear It Away* also comes from a family religion that is as much encrypted in his DNA as in his mind. Home-schooled, Tarwater receives lessons in history from his great-uncle Mason that have their basis not in an academic curriculum but the Tarwater bloodlines themselves, "suggesting a lineage of prophets….extend[ing] back to Elijah and Elisha" (Ambrosiano 130). When Mason abruptly dies over breakfast, Tarwater, who has always questioned his great-uncle's beliefs, rejects most of his inheritance—the house at Powderhead, the call to be a prophet, and the charge to baptize his retarded cousin, Bishop—and

takes only a bottle of liquor, with which he commits the sin of drunkenness. Rather than give Mason a Christian burial, Tarwater elects to simply burn down the house around the corpse and sets off, as Hazel did before him, for the sinful city and its unsaved inhabitants.

He finds a temporary shelter with his mostly-deaf uncle, Rayber, Bishop's father, who has also rejected Mason's call to prophesy. Just as Hazel Motes is incapable of escaping his grandfather's influence, Tarwater is haunted by the family charge: "he has rejected his heritage by not burying [Mason]—but it has not rejected him" (Shinn 70-1). The moment he sees Bishop, Tarwater recognizes the inevitable:

> …the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet…[he] knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and that the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable. His black pupils, glassy and still, reflected…his own stricken image of himself, trudging into the distance in the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus, until at last he received his reward, a broken fish, a multiplied loaf (TVBIA 91).

The recognition of himself as a future prophet causes Tarwater to simultaneously reject Rayber's atheistic lifestyle for its moral corruption and Bishop's company for the godly temptation it presents.

We might also note in the above passage a recognition of the pain Tarwater must inflict and endure. Unlike Hazel, Tarwater is well aware of the violence of the religious lifestyles (as presented in O'Connor's work), for Mason has told him the story of how he had once meant to raise Rayber to be a prophet and how Rayber rejected that call—a story that involves no fewer than two instances of kidnapping, a perversion of baptism (when Rayber poured the water over

the infant Tarwater's hindquarters), and the gunshot that took most of Rayber's hearing and permanently damaged one of his legs. This second recognition, making Tarwater far more prepared to cause suffering and suffer in return, spurs him on to torment Rayber, meeting his uncle's every gesture of kindness with disdain, practice, perhaps, for the life he knows he will one day lead as a fire-and-brimstone Old Testament prophet. At this point, Tarwater recognizes he is a prodigal and knows he will soon return home.

His self-awareness does not, however, spare him pain and discomfort. Under Rayber's secular guardianship, Tarwater finds himself unable to eat, even when he is very hungry. The asceticism into which his unwilling journey toward God's violent grace leads him occurs much sooner than that of Hazel Motes, and has both a physical and spiritual manifestation. When Tarwater runs away from Rayber at night, his uncle follows to see what it is the boy has gone looking for, hoping he (Rayber) might purchase it in order to gain the boy's affection. What Rayber finds in his nephew's wake isn't a set of new clothes or a trinket (like the corkscrew he will later buy for Tarwater), but rather a bakery window, beyond which sits "a loaf of bread pushed to the side that must have been overlooked when the shelf was cleaned for the night" (TVBIA 122). Incapable of believing in Mason's God, Rayber mistakes this sign of Tarwater's spiritual hunger for physical hunger, and remains just as cynical when he follows the boy to the temple to hear the child-prophet Lucette Carmody preach. Though far more intelligent than Enoch Emery, Rayber nonetheless fulfills the role of the prodigal's unfavored brother in this novel, misinterpreting every sign of the Father and acting out of ignorance of the true workings of the divine.

Sensing the hold God—through the deceased Mason—continues to exercise over Tarwater, Rayber takes him and Bishop to the Cherokee Lodge, a "converted warehouse" that

overlooks a lake (149). His explicit intention to "cure" Tarwater is merely a delusion he has created to alleviate his own conscience: having inherited the same "madness" of God as Tarwater (Wilson 79), Rayber knows full well what will happen. O'Connor's change to Rayber's point of view in the middle of the novel allows the reader to know what Tarwater cannot—that Rayber once came close to drowning Bishop himself at the beach. The attempted drowning, to the atheist Rayber, seems to have come from his own resentment of his retarded son, but when we consider that O'Connor's violent God works first through hereditary mental fixations, we can interpret Rayber's actions as either yet another perversion of a baptism, anticipating the one Tarwater will later give the child, or an unconscious attempt to perform the real baptism himself. The beach scene marks the first instance in which Rayber has the chance to become—somewhat unwillingly—an agent of God's grace, and at the Cherokee Lodge, he fulfills that potential by allowing Tarwater to take the boy out on the lake unattended.

The dim-witted Bishop's existence has no independent purpose; he lives simply as "a bodily continuation of the prophets' transcendent history…a means of converging the violent irrationality shared by his relatives into their prophetic realization manifested in Tarwater" (Ambrosiano 138). His singular reason for living, then, is to be the victim of Tarwater's first baptism, as even the most essential sign of his vitality—his breath—seems to indicate: "It was a kind of bubbling noise, the kind of noise someone would make who was struggling to breathe in water" (TVBIA 83). With the water so close by and Rayber's abrupt indifference, the prodigal Tarwater thinks he can escape his family's legacy by killing Bishop instead of baptizing him, setting them both free from Mason's charge, but just as Hazel, in the midst of committing murder, becomes a confessor, so does Tarwater become an intermediary. "It is in the very act of murder," writes Rainulf Stelzmann, noted scholar and former Professor Emeritus at the

University of San Francisco, "that God surprises and overwhelms" Tarwater, and the boy realizes he is baptizing his victim (12). In dying, Bishop leaves his father's godless, rational world and finds a new home with his true Father. In killing, Tarwater has simultaneously fulfilled Mason's charge and performed the sacrifice of the fatted calf.

Here the prodigal begins his physical journey home to Powderhead. Where Hazel still had the Essex, Tarwater lacks any possession save his body, and it is precisely his body that must, in a way, be destroyed for him to achieve the humility needed for grace and redemption. As Tarwater hitches rides through the country, the voice that has blasphemed in his head since Mason's death, none other than the devil, manifests as the man in the lavender and cream-colored car, who drugs and rapes him in the woods. The rape scene has been criticized as being unnecessary, mere arbitrary violence meant to shock the reader, but, when we consider the novel as a parable, the accusation doesn't hold up against O'Connor's unique intervention of grace. As we saw previously in Luke's gospel and with Hazel Motes, the prodigal must be entirely humbled, and the rape serves this purpose: "Stripped of his clothes, his hat gone, the boy has suffered his most devastating ordeal, the violent piercing of his proud unworldiness, the rape of the self-sufficient ego" (Asals 189). Though performed by the devil, the rape's sacramental nature is explicitly emphasized in O'Connor's persistent use of purple—in addition to the color of the car, purple appears in the man's eyes and in his shirt, and finally in the handkerchief with which he binds the unconscious Tarwater's hands. While O'Connor herself associated the man with homosexuality and perversion and her color choice seems to play into a gay stereotype, we shouldn't overlook the fact that it is also "the liturgical color of Advent and Lent, [the] seasons of preparation and penance," which is exactly what the rape inspires in Tarwater (Driskell 102).

Violent and shocking as the scene is, in O'Connor's parable the rape renders Tarwater emotionally impoverished, leaving him to, like Hazel, walk home.

One more task lies between Tarwater and Powderhead, and that is for the boy to rid himself fully of the devil who has guided and abused him. He sets fire to the site of his rape, eradicating all traces of it and essentially "blinding" the trees that witnessed it. The burning of the woods both destroys and saves, for it serves as a second baptism for Tarwater. Indeed, as Hedda Ben-Bassat, Professor of English at Tel Aviv University notes,

> …by fusing fire with the lake, and by implicitly fusing Gnostic baptism by fire with Christian baptism by water, O'Connor ironically makes fiery baptism itself a step in the traditional Christian journey to redemption, associating it with Purgatory rather than hell (85).

Tarwater purges the devil from his mind and soul, becoming, as Mason predicted, a prophet who would cleanse through burning.

When he finally comes home to Powderhead, Tarwater finds that his blasphemy there—his maltreatment of Mason's corpse—has been negated by the neighbors, who have given the dead prophet a proper burial. They do not accept Tarwater, but it isn't their acceptance that he needs; that acceptance can come only from God, who has in Tarwater's mind always been represented by Mason. At his great-uncle's grave, in view of the spreading fire he himself has set, Tarwater senses that "this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him." He collapses onto Mason's grave and receives his next charge: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY" (TVBIA 242). The words are those of God and those of Mason, as well as the whole line of prophets from whom the Tarwater family has spiritually

descended. The prodigal has come home in perfect obedience to his Father and will now be sent forth again to do his Father's bidding. O'Connor was quite clear about what happens to Tarwater after he answers the call: "He must of course not live to realize his mission, but die to realize it" (HB 342). His death, like Hazel's, joins him fully to the God who has accepted his penance through torture and who now welcomes him.

The prodigal son is one of the most popular biblical images in our culture, appearing even in secular works of art. O'Connor's unique treatment of the parable in her novels continues to stand apart even in our 21st century society that is often quite accepting of violent media; indeed, her parable-novels offer an artistic viewpoint on violence scarcely to be found in other popular literature. Her madmen are saints; her murderers are prophets and apostles, and their victims are martyrs to the cause of Christ. What her prodigals seek to escape, ultimately, isn't their physical home but their own blood and the violent Father who won't let them rest until they come crawling back to Him, broken and repentant. Perhaps only in her version of the parable do we feel so uncomfortable with the reunion of the Father and the son, and only in her version is this reunion meant to disturb those who do not share the author's belief in the religious necessity of violence. Her prodigal suffers and the modern reader suffers with him. When at last the prodigal dies, we are hard pressed to find reassurance in the parable's gruesome message.

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