

Flannery O'Connor's Living Medievalism

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In the volume of *Year's Work in Medievalism* dedicated to the memory of Leslie J. Workman (XV [2000]), Gwendolyn Morgan edited one of her most far-reaching issues. Morgan provides critical and scholarly articles on the medievalism of various periods and media along with contributions to the more expansive area of “living medievalism,” that is, as Morgan puts it, “bringing Medievalism out of the academic closet and observing it at work in everyday life.”¹ This living medievalism, which Morgan was especially keen on promoting, making it the concentration of the conference the year she hosted the International Society for the Study of Medievalism, nicely characterizes Flannery O'Connor's most significant way of being medieval. O'Connor attempted to live a kind of medieval life, and one of the great sensations of reading O'Connor comes when the reader senses, imagines, and sometimes assumes the experience of O'Connor's medieval life. These experiences differ markedly from normative experiences of modernity, and the wrenching together of these radically differing medieval and modern experiences accounts for much of the thrill of reading O'Connor. As with heeding Morgan, reading O'Connor can pleasingly and rewardingly generate exaggerated, maximum medieval feelings. For O'Connor, these feelings are those that disturb twentieth-century experiences of reality in favor of very un-modern, perhaps Medieval, certainly O'Connor-esque mental and emotional states of spiritual grace.

Among the literary features O'Connor masterfully devises, the narrative voice perhaps best enacts and generates her distinctive medievalizing of modernity. The enactment and generation of the medievalizing of modernity involves what O'Connor understood to be the pious state of participation with the divine, something very tough for a modern person to imagine, much less to do. In reading O'Connor, however, those who experience that ineffable quality of sensation most characteristic of her stories—ironic, grotesque, yet paradoxically also simple, plain and true—are feeling what O'Connor understood to be the pious state of participation with the divine. This participation with the divine is, for O'Connor, medieval in that it is a state of being beyond that permitted by modernity. This is distinct from her advertised Catholicism, which was more to resist the South and its peculiarities than it was a manifestation of her medievalism.² The medievalism O'Connor comes to as a young and new author in Iowa and culminating in the publication of her first novel, *Wise Blood*, uses the modernity of her environment and her experiences to generate itself

¹ See Introduction to *The Year's Work in Medievalism* XIV (1999), i.

² Tison Pugh discusses O'Connor and her medievalism and resistance to Southern masculinist culture in his chapter, “Medieval Masculinity, Southern Chivalry, and Redemptive Homosexuality in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction,” in his book, *Queer Chivalry: Medievalism and the Myth of White Masculinity in Southern Literature* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2013), 53-82. See also Brad Gooch, “Thirteenth-Century Lady,” *Flannery O'Connor Review* 5 (July 2007): 23, and *A Life of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2009).

as a transformation of modernity.³ The medievalism is not doctrinal or confessional or dogmatic. Rather, the medievalism is ontological or that of experience, the experience of grace, which all “human nature,” O’Connor writes to Cecil Dawkins, “vigorously resists . . . because grace changes us and the change is painful.”⁴

Many features of *Wise Blood* offer painful change for the reader who would be O’Connor’s graceful reader, with the narrative voice being perhaps the most distinctive and, if permitted, most effective. The novel follows its hero, Hazel Motes, from his return from war to his achievement of grace. Grace in the novel is always in modern terms such as those of sexuality or economics, but the terms are violently engaged and through the violence made also ironically and paradoxically redemptive. It is the irony and paradox developed from the modern terms—and not replacing the modern terms, but developing from and thereby abidingly dependent upon them—that leads to the experience of O’Connor’s sense of the medieval. The combination of modern terms and medievalizing irony and paradox produces a narrative voice that takes the style of the omniscient objective point of view and mixes it with other narrative points of view, notably of the various characters. Three narrative descriptions of Hazel Motes’s face will indicate how this process works.

One instance is when Haze, as he is often called by the narrator, comes to a young man who wants Haze to come to him, but whom Haze has been avoiding. This young man is called Enoch Emery. Enoch knows, because he “had wise blood like his daddy” (40), that Haze is the person he has been looking for, to achieve his own greatness, yet Haze wants nothing to do with anyone, except for the person who can help him excise all possibilities of possessing any Christian feeling. Because Haze has decided to seduce / statutorily rape the blind preacher’s daughter, Sabbath Lily Hawks, he seeks out Enoch Emery, hoping that Enoch will have an address for the girl. Enoch gets Haze’s attention just as Haze has given up and is about to drive off, and the narrator discloses the following:

Hazel Motes cut off the motor. His face behind the windshield was sour and frog-like; it looked as if it had a shout closed up in it; it looked like one of those closet doors in gangster pictures where someone is tied to a chair behind it with a towel in his mouth. (44)

The three similes describing Haze’s face provide the mixing of point of view here, since one has to take on very specific mental and emotional vantages to comprehend the similes. Most remarkably, the similes demand that a reader imagine first that he or she sees the face through a windshield as Enoch does and then, with the third simile, the reader is given something more familiar, the feeling

³ Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood*, 3 by Flannery O’Connor (New York: Signet, 1983), 1-120. Further references in the text.

⁴ Flannery O’Connor, *The Habit of Being* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 307. Further references in the text.

he or she has when watching a scene in a gangster movie. The second simile sees both from Enoch's perspective and the reader's cinematic perspective.

This stylistically plain omniscient objective description employing similes drawn from multiple perspectives can bewilder a reader and requires deliberate consideration. It can be simple, if it is mostly ignored and simply registered as a long way of saying that Haze waits for Enoch to get to the car. It can be funny, if one or another part of the description strikes the imaginative fancy. Yet, when a reader attempts to consider the entire description, it makes no sense to the linear, consistent and singularly objective reader of an omniscient objective narrator, a narrator who, as O'Connor affirms to an English professor from Tift College, "is not properly supposed to use colloquial expressions" (*Habit of Being* 69). But it does use colloquialisms and more. It becomes intelligible only by a reader who comprehends all the literal and ironic statements and suggestions paradoxically, and such a reader is not strictly a modern reader anymore, even as his or her reading is rooted in the modernity of his surrounding, his literacy, and O'Connor's narrative voice.

Another similar instance of the objective omniscient narrator medievalizing herself and her reader is when Haze follows the blind preacher and his child to their home. On the porch, the child turns and, it seems, notices Haze, and Haze, in his car, seems keenly to observe the child. The narrator relates the facts as follows:

The child turned her head, slowly, as if it worked on a screw, and watched his car pass. His face was so close to the glass that it looked like a paper face pasted there. He noted the number of the house and a sign on it that said, ROOMS FOR RENT. (53)

The grim humor of such a passage comes, of course, when the reader vividly imagines the visual images of the child's head being a doll's head screwed onto shoulders and of Haze's face being an image of his face pasted onto the window. The humor deepens when the reader considers what the images mean as similes. One interpretation that makes the images as similes make sense is to understand that the similes belong to the mind of the characters—Sabbath is a plaything, a doll to Haze, not a child, and Haze is a silly cartoon, a paper-face man to Sabbath, not a stalking rapist. The humor becomes mordant as the reader further understands his or her own reaction to the view and the views. Even in an age such as O'Connor felt that she lived in, an age in which people cannot see the "almost imperceptible intrusions of grace" any more than they can feel "the violences which precede and follow them,"⁵ readers can see here that something's up with the descriptions. That something is a pleasing terror at one's increasing comprehension of how two people are drawn to

⁵ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), 112. Further references in the text.

one another by sinful impulses that will yield violent effects, and—this is what is really terrifying for the modern reader resisting the medievalization—how good and right this be.

“His face was stern and tranquil” (*Wise Blood* 120): So describes Haze’s face at the very end of the novel and is the third instance of the narrative voice generating O’Connor’s medieval state of being. The delectably shocking ironies and paradoxes of the plain and simple objective description of Haze’s face at the end of the novel are too many to treat here, but one is the paradox that O’Connor would become famous for: That is, because of her short story, “A Good Man Is Hard To Find,” the face of those who achieve grace in an ugly and violent murder has become a grotesque hallmark of O’Connor.⁶ With “her face smiling up at a cloudless sky,”⁷ the grandmother of “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” appears, to a modern mind, to be perversely pleased with being brutally handled and shot dead by the Misfit, and, according to the ways of O’Connor’s grace, the grandmother is pleased. With Haze, his brutal murder is at the hands of the police. About Haze’s demise, the narrator tells us that, “He died in the squad car but they [i.e., the two police officers] didn’t notice and took him on to the landlady’s” (120), where Haze was to pay the rent that the landlady, Mrs. Flood, falsely claimed he owed her. The police put Haze in Mrs. Flood’s bed, as she directed them to do, and then Mrs. Flood runs them off, in order to be alone with Haze in what for Mrs. Flood was now their nuptial bed. The narrator then reports the dramatic scene in which Mrs. Flood locks the bedroom door, sits down with her face close to Haze’s stern and tranquil and dead face, holds his hand fervently, and says,

“I knew you’d come back. . . . And I’ve been waiting for you. And you needn’t to pay any more rent but have it free here, any way you like, upstairs or down. Just however you want it and with me to wait on you, or if you want to go on somewhere, we’ll both go.” (120)

Mrs. Flood, of course, is overjoyed with the prospect of taking over all of Haze’s monthly “government check” (113), rather than settling for only two-thirds, as she was getting, having raised his rent considerably upon learning how much his monthly check amounted to, and this fact both horrifies and gratifies the reader. A reader with the slightest sense of proper romanticism holds Mrs. Flood in contempt for her feelings of nuptial love yet revels in the fact that her unrequiting lover and his government check are now dead, never to be enjoyed by her more than they are in the moment. A reader with the slightest sense of ethical or even, perhaps, psychological empathy for Haze feels a kind of horror at the way the authorities of his life have treated him, even as such a modern reader can be gratified by the inference that this is exactly what an ethical or even simply

⁶ Two other ironies and paradoxes include those involving the fact that Haze’s face is dead while Mrs. Flood thinks he is only unconscious from being beaten by the police, and the mock romance of the face in the mock nuptial chamber.

⁷ Flannery O’Connor, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in *A Good Man Is Hard To Find and Other Stories* (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1983), 29. Further references in the text.

psychological reader expects of such a degraded social environment. A reader with some sort of Christian sentiment is mostly baffled, as a proper Southern Protestant does not know what to make of a contemporaneous saint like Hazel Motes, and other Christians are almost impertinent, unless they live in a medievalized modern manner. This medievalized modern reader of O'Connor, medievalized by imagining the stories as O'Connor indicates one should, experiences all of these interpretive sensations simultaneously, and in the collapsing of polarizing ontologies,⁸ the medievalized modern reader enjoys O'Connor's ideal experience, an experience she abidingly committed herself to having and inditing, an experience that I am recognizing as O'Connor's essential medievalism. As O'Connor puts it plainly in her Iowa journal at the time she was inventing material for her novel *Wise Blood*, like Hazel Motes at his most degraded, violent and murderous death, O'Connor, too, wants a wise heart and soul:

If I am the one to wash the second step everyday,⁹ [O'Connor implores,] let me know it and let me wash it and let my heart overflow with love washing it. God loves us, God needs us. My soul too. So then take it dear God because it knows that You are all it should want and if it were wise You would be all it would want and the times it thinks wise, You are all it does want, and it wants more and more to want You.¹⁰

No wonder the grandmother is smiling and Hazel Motes is tranquil. Each, with his or her creator, wants more and more to want his or her creator. The moment a reader enjoys the comprehension and participation in this fact, she or he participates in O'Connor's medievalising powers, and interpreting the narrative voice is a major means of accessing this living medievalism. It is in the act of interpretation, of course, that the stories can have any effect, and in O'Connor, the effect is, in part, to produce her form of violent, grotesque, ironic, and salvific medievalism.

⁸ It is O'Connor's form of medievalism and not a standard modern practice to experience multiple interpretive sensations simultaneously while collapsing polarizing ontologies.

⁹ In the example of Christ's servitude to humankind, the first step in washing feet is to help the person recognize how he or she has been mistreated; the second step is to help the person recognize how he or she reacted wrongly to the mistreatment. An author like O'Connor is washing feet, but she says here that she washes the second step, showing how people have reacted wrongly to their mistreatment. (The third step is the person herself or himself confessing a wrong reaction and proceeding with the correct reaction.)

¹⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *A Prayer Journal* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 38.