

EDITOR'S PREFACE

This issue of *Literature and Belief* is both catholic in the sense that its essays cover a variety of topics and Catholic in the sense that several of the essays explore select aspects of life in Catholicism or discuss the life and work of the great Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor.

In "Altar Boy"—the personal essay that inaugurates the issue—John L. Stanizzi looks back on his days as an altar boy at St. Mary's church with nostalgia, humor, and a dollop of gentle irony. "Those were good times," he concludes. "I wasn't in any trouble. And I always felt a little holy, a little closer to Jesus" (7).

Maintaining holiness is hard, however, and in many cases, the heaven-sent impulse to search for God and desire holiness is either corrupted or counterfeited in the pursuit of other, more earthly rewards. Certainly O'Connor thought so. And in "The Jesus Business: Flannery O'Connor and the Economy of Redemption," Andrew J. Ball makes a persuasive case that O'Connor's *Wise Blood* is best understood as a demonstration of the ways in which capitalism—and its attendant consumer culture—turn the quest for personal and spiritual betterment into simply yet another commercial exchange:

Each of O'Connor's characters is unable to extricate themselves from the manner of thinking and being that is characteristic of consumer culture. Each is radically materialistic, and as such, immensely egotistical. Personal and spiritual transformation or betterment, as a result of this immersion, can only be conceived of in terms of commercial exchange. Salvation is commodified and is understood strictly in terms of an economy of immediate transaction. For O'Connor, the popular avenues of both religious and existential upbuilding are wholly co-opted by American consumer culture and have deteriorated to the grotesque state represented in *Wise Blood*. (10)

O'Connor identifies a second counterfeit to holiness in her story "The Lame Shall Enter First." There, the impulse to worship God

has been replaced by the impulse to play God—to use the secular methods and perspectives of the social sciences to create personhood anew. O'Connor's story exemplifies her antipathy toward the social sciences of her time, and as Brian Fehler points out in "Flannery O'Connor, Richard M. Weaver, and Midcentury Conservative Critiques of Social Science Discourse," O'Connor's story embodies three of the critiques of social science expressed by O'Connor's contemporary Richard M. Weaver: self-deception, lack of a unified ontological basis, and dishonest optimism. In the story, the protagonist is a professional sociologist named Sheppard. Sheppard attempts to use the perspectives of social science to both remake a juvenile delinquent into a superior version of himself and to persuade Sheppard's only son to quit mourning the death of his mother. The result is tragedy: a more hardened delinquent and a dead son. In Fehler's view, that tragedy—and in fact the story generally—makes clear that "O'Connor's critique of the social sciences . . . is as vigorous as those of critics such as Ransom and Cowley, but unlike theirs, her response grows out of a special ethic of responsibility—an ethic that is characteristic of both her understanding of the purpose of art and of her role as a Catholic artist" (32).

Part of Cheryl D. Coleman's analysis in "Unapologetic Goodness in Patrick Gale's *A Perfectly Good Man*" is based upon O'Connor's 25 January 1957 letter to a friend. But though O'Connor's letter provides a convenient lens through which to examine select aspects of Gale's novel, both the novel and Coleman's essay are catholic rather than Catholic—the novel's protagonist is Father Barnaby Johnson, a priest in the Church of England, and Coleman's analysis highlights a challenge faced by writers of faith generally: how much harder it is to describe good than evil. Using Thomas à Kempis's assertion that "[a]ll perfection in this life hath some imperfection bound up with it; and no knowledge of ours is without some darkness" as a guide, Coleman argues persuasively that *A Perfectly Good Man* is able to portray goodness in ways that may resonate with the sensibilities of even a jaded contemporary reader:

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[Father] Johnson struggles with his own failings, doubts, and loss of faith, so goodness in Gale's novel is not equated with perfection though the novel's title can give readers pause. Goodness, in fact, does not require *human* perfection in the Christian realm; à Kempis repeatedly reminds followers of Christ that though they should strive for righteousness, humans are imperfect, sin can be forgiven, and belief can overcome doubt. (52)

In "Chiyo-ni: Seeking Suchness," Julie Allen explores various of the connections among history, culture, art, and goodness as well. The artist she discusses, though, is a Buddhist nun rather than a Church of England priest. And the version of "goodness" she describes is distinctly Buddhist: it is an expression of beauty which—in the words of D. T. Suzuki—finds joy and balance and harmony in "the suchness of things. Flowers are flowers, mountains are mountains, I sit here, you stand there, and the world goes on from eternity to eternity, this is the suchness of things" (qtd. in 93). Bashō ably represents this Buddhist tradition, of course, but so—argues Allen—does Chiyo-ni, who at the time of her death in 1775 was Japan's most renowned living poet of haiku. Chiyo-ni's farewell haiku—which was spoken shortly before her death—can be taken as a stellar example of the Buddhist ideal of suchness. As Allen observes, in the poem Chiyo-ni "shares her desire for spiritual detachment, as her focus on the beauty of the moon speaks of a separate but present aspect of this world. The moon lights the night sky from its distant position in the heavens. She accepts the 'suchness' of her death while still seeking the beauty of life":

Tsuki mo mite ware wa kono yo o kashiku kana

Looking also at the moon

I write to this world

"yours truly" (107)

The issue's concluding essay—Terry W. Thompson's "'The Genius of Famine Descending': Ichabod Crane and the Third Horseman of Revelation"—explores not the suchness of spiritual detachment but

the consequences of human avarice. Noting parallels between the description of Ichabod Crane in “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and the description of the Third Horseman in Revelation, Thompson brings unexpected interpretive weight to bear on Irving’s enigmatic description of Crane as “the genius of famine descending” (117). In Thompson’s intertextual reading of secular and sacred texts, avarice is more than mere averse and Crane more than a mere schoolmaster from Connecticut: “it is the Third Horseman of the Apocalypse, generally seen as the most enigmatic and mysterious of the four, who is echoed and evoked by the gaunt silhouette of the ambitious Yankee schoolmaster who hails from out of state and harbors secret dreams of gaining great wealth at someone else’s expense” (114).

—Daniel K. Muhlestein