

The Jesus Business: Flannery O'Connor and the Economy of Redemption

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The critical debate surrounding Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* is largely fought along the line dividing the sacred and the secular, the former camp at odds over whether or not Hazel Motes is successfully redeemed,¹ the other reading the novel as either an “ironic study in pathology” (Satterfield 33) or an indictment of social deterioration (Donahoo 43; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as PP). Taking our cue from Jonathan Witt, who suggests that we attempt to find “a golden mean in our approach to [O'Connor’s] body of work” (15), we can reconcile these two standpoints by reading the novel as a critique of rising American consumerism in the 1950s, related through a representation of its detrimental effects on the mind, body, and spirit of the South, both at the societal and individual levels. Taulkingham, wholly immersed in the consumer culture of cheap commodities, neon signs, and saturated with the images and discourse of advertising, is symbolic of the nascent, though paradigmatic change that O'Connor witnessed taking place in the South. With *Wise Blood*, O'Connor reflects on the

¹See Witt, Wood, Satterfield, and Asals.

psychological and spiritual grotesquery that is the necessary outcome of the region's adoption of capitalist norms.

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*. Because of the entrenchment of consumerism in both the social relations of the people and in their individual psyches, Hazel Motes—though he is capable of reflecting on its inauthentic nature—ultimately fails to free himself from an economic conception of redemption. Motes's notion of redemption is fundamentally flawed as a result of its reduction to the structure and logic of capitalism. O'Connor suggests that this crucial misconception and his rejection of the Incarnation make Motes unable to transcend his egotism and attain salvation.

1. CONSUMING CONVERSION

Each character in *Wise Blood* is burdened by a materialism that shapes the way they perceive themselves and their own potential self-transformation. O'Connor sees this as a pressing danger in part because this manner of thinking puts too great an emphasis on the material world of commodities as the only sphere of personal fulfillment, one that is ultimately groundless and deceptive. And yet, she does not seek to disparage the value of the earthly realm as such. This is a common misreading of her use of the grotesque, which overlooks the importance of the Incarnation in her employment of this technique.² Christ's embodiment in the Incarnation is, for O'Connor, the

²See Srigley 55–89ff (hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as SA), Desmond, and Gentry.

ultimate manifestation of the essential union of the divine and material realms. For O'Connor, the modern age "speciously believed in its own capacity for achieving wholeness exclusive of the divine" (Desmond 53), and it is this problem that she represents through her use of the grotesque. Her use of the grotesque is a method of critiquing the norms of consumer culture that locate value in the material alone. In a 1959 letter she writes that "some revolt against our exaggerated materialism is long overdue" (*Habit of Being* 336); her characters' inability to wage just such a revolt, even on a personal level, is what constitutes their grotesquery. Jon Lance Bacon writes that "materialism defines the existence of Hazel and the other characters. Their lives are circumscribed by the material world, understood in two ways—as a world in which the spiritual has no place, as a world in which everything is for sale" (36; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as FS). In this sense, consumer society is perceived as offering the only means for self-alteration, identity formation, and self-realization, each being "for sale" in the form of commodities. According to this manner of thinking, "the spiritual has no place" in individual fulfillment.

Enoch Emery is the character "most closely identified with consumerism" (FS 29); we read that he has a "fondness for Supermarkets" and that "it was his custom to spend an hour or so in one every afternoon . . . browsing around among the canned goods and reading the cereal stories" (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 130; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *WB*). O'Connor sets Emery "against a background of alarm clocks, toilet waters, candies, sanitary pads, fountain pens, and pocket flashlights," among the images, rhetoric, and trivialities of consumer society to indicate the horizon of his worldview (*WB* 135). These alone are the constituent elements that comprise Emery's subjectivity and it is only within these limits that he can (re)make himself. O'Connor writes that Emery "was not a boy without ambition: he wanted to become something. He wanted to be THE young man of the future, like the ones in the insurance ads. He wanted some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand" (*WB* 193). Emery's conception of his identity, his criteria for self-worth, and his sense of what constitutes personal accomplishment

are all wholly informed by the images and language of consumer culture. Completely divorced from the realm of the spiritual, the only potentials for self-transcendence are through the acquisition of commodities or by conforming to an outward image validated by advertising. In this way, Emery's idea of ultimate personal fulfillment is limited to a single image or to the attainment of a particular job. Not only is this immensely superficial and restricted, but is a life-objective completely devoid of a sense of morality, community, or responsibility.

In her depiction of Emery's attempt to realize his ambition of seeing "a line of people waiting to shake his hand," O'Connor problematizes the superficiality and egocentrism that inevitably result from the adoption of materialist values. Because Emery bases his conception of achievement on the images of advertising alone, he believes that he can wholly transform and better himself simply by donning a new appearance, one that has been validated by consumer culture. He sees this as an act of self-transcendence, a means to become something more than he was before. Since a superficial and immediate change is all that is required, and since this existential aim makes no valuations concerning its means of achievement, Emery readily resorts to violence in order to obtain the gorilla suit. O'Connor argues that the manner of redemption—meant here simply as a deliverance from a base and hollow existence into a higher, more valuable and fulfilling form of life—that is sanctioned by consumer culture is one that is seen as immediately accessible through a superficial change. But for O'Connor, this is antithetical to true redemption, which for her is a continual process that alters one's spirit rather than simply one's appearance. This mode of self-transcendence—the relinquishment of one superficial aspect of yourself in exchange for another—is based solely in the structure and logic of commercial exchange and can only be achieved through purchasing more commodities. Therefore, this form of redemption intends only to sustain the economic system rather than serving as a means to secure any real comprehensive change in people.

This form of inauthentic redemption is repeated—again figured as being enacted simply by changing one's appearance—when Motes and Solace purchase new suits. Both discard their old suits,

and symbolically their old selves, when they assume the new identities embodied by these products. O'Connor writes that after buying the glare-blue suit Motes put "his army suit in a paper sack and he stuffed it into a trashbox on the corner" (*WB* 19). Similarly, when Hazel demands that Solace remove his suit, already the defining feature of Hazel's identity and, as such, unavailable to be the identifying marker of Solace as well, Solace protests, lamenting "I thrown my othern away" (*WB* 205). By acquiring new suits, Solace and Motes believe they are somehow washed of the sins associated with the old suits, which they have repented of and thrown away. They are baptized by a material rather than a spiritual gift and as a result they feel as if they have been given a new start, a clean slate. They feel that the possession of this commodity fulfills their need for salvation. As Jean Baudrillard states in his *Consumer Society*, the consumption of merchandise invokes a sense of "magical salvation"; the "metonymic discourse of the consumable," where one "purchases the part for the whole," allows us to wholly alter our perceived being simply by exchanging one part for another (30).

In the New Testament, one way in which redemption is understood is as a deliverance from oppression (1 Cor. 15.20–28, 54, 56–57) (O'Collins 222). Hazel perceives his purchase of the Essex as the means to actualize his deliverance from the oppression of human interdependence. He sees the Essex as his means to complete autonomy and self-reliance. It serves to "confirm his self-conception as a totally free individual" who can achieve wholeness as a human being exclusive of the divine and other members of the community (FS 34). With it he can completely isolate himself and maintain his potential for immediate mobility. For Hazel, the car is an embodiment of his freedom. The commodity serves as the instrument for Hazel's self-imposed alienation from the community and his unwillingness to accept responsibility or accountability for anyone other than himself. Motes proclaims that "nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (*WB* 109). The possession of the commodity does not replace the need for redemption, but fulfills it, making redemption through the blood of Christ unnecessary.

Bacon argues that "the value he places on the Essex shows that Hazel has succumbed to a way of thinking fostered by consumer

society. He links his identity with a product of American industry, a car" (FS 34). But, because it is destroyed, the Essex ultimately fails Hazel in this regard. Bacon continues, "the destruction of the product with which he has identified himself forces Hazel to consider the possibility of some reality other than the material" (FS 35). It is just this emblematic failure of the material that leads O'Connor to write, in a 1953 letter to Brainard Cheney: "I didn't see the patrolman as the tempter on the mountain top . . . when he pushed that car over, he was an angel of light, I am sure" (*Correspondence* 3). Hazel misinterprets the car as the means to his liberation rather than, as O'Connor would have us believe, the very thing that prevents it. For O'Connor, we require deliverance from the oppression and corrupting force of consumer culture. Commodities do not fulfill our potential for self-transcendence but rather impede it. In this sense, the patrolman is an angel of redemption insofar as he destroys the obstacle hindering Hazel's self-realization. Whether or not Hazel makes good on this, we will discuss further in section three. For O'Connor, "consumers who identify themselves with products, or with the imagery used to advertise these products, will be disappointed and betrayed in their search for self-realization" (FS 34). Indeed, we find that both Motes and Emery suffer immensely by attempting to remake themselves through identification with the objects and images of commerce. Not only does O'Connor argue that consumer culture's infiltration of the South has warped individuals' relation to commodities, misconstruing their power by imbuing them with redemptive and transformative significance, but also that such infiltration has simultaneously produced and intensified widespread fetishism, effecting a sacralization of capitalism itself. As a result, salesmen are transformed into priestly figures while preachers adopt the discourse of capitalist economy, offering redemption in the form of economic exchange.

2. FALSE PROFITS

For O'Connor, the most insidious change that has occurred in the South as a result of the spread of American consumer culture is the fundamental shift in the way that people understand the nature of

Christian redemption. One might attribute the watering-down of this theological concept in the South to the discourse of evangelicalism. O'Connor would concur, but would go a step further, attributing the deterioration of this concept to its progressive conflation with commercial exchange. As a result, preachers begin to sound like salesmen and salesmen begin to sound like preachers. Moreover, the similarity does not simply end with their rhetorical styles. While religion becomes increasingly desacralized as it adopts the rhetoric and logic of capitalism, consumerism, in turn, becomes increasingly sacralized as it becomes more discursively indistinguishable from religion. Through her depiction of the novel's evangelists, O'Connor argues that "American religion has been appropriated by the 'salesman's world'" (FS 39). As a result, faith and redemption have become commodities that can be purchased as one would a potato peeler. The "Jesus business," in the world of *Wise Blood*, has become precisely that (WB 40). For O'Connor, this inauthentic, grotesque deformation of Christianity merely serves "to sustain the civic religion of laissez-faire capitalism" (FS 44).

We first encounter the two, ironically similar, kinds of salesman-preacher at the same moment in the text. The seller of the potato peelers—who stands "in front of his altar" (WB 34)—and the evangelist Asa Hawks each vie for the attention of their spontaneous congregation, hawking wares that promise to change the lives of the believers-purchasers forever, and only at a minimal cost. O'Connor's choice to publish this chapter of *Wise Blood* as "The Peeler" prior to the release of the novel speaks to its significance for the author's overall project. Each salesman-preacher presents a sales pitch to the congregation, attempting to sell a commodity of convenience. However, it is the secular man that stands before an altar—for O'Connor the profane altar of consumerism—who markets the peeler, while it is the passing evangelical who advertises the easy liquidation of the congregation's need for redemption at the low price of a mere nickel. By proclaiming, "if you won't repent, give up a nickel," Hawks offers an out for those who do not want to attain redemption authentically (WB 36). In effect he is selling Protestant indulgences. As a Catholic writer, O'Connor is fully aware of the divisive

role that the sale of indulgences played in the development of the Protestant Reformation. With the rise of consumer culture, she argues, Protestantism reverts to the same deplorable practices that initially engendered its rebellion. Martin Luther's conviction that one could not merely purchase redemption—either monetarily or through works—was a fundamental aspect of Protestant doctrine, and yet, as capitalism consumes the South, becoming the dominant ideological power, this becomes a conventional practice and aspect of evangelical discourse.

Robert Donahoo argues that “the potato peeler serves as a metaphor for a type of action that O'Connor saw as prevalent in her culture,” namely “the American tendency to address a problem by changing its appearance,” and imbuing money with the divine power to instantly change one's quality of life through the purchase of products, now the sole means of attaining redemption (PP 54). O'Connor's characters perceive redemption as a kind of “potato peeler change”; just as the “potato [goes] into the box and then in a second, back[s] out the other side, white,” the consumerist version of redemption is one that is only skin deep, acquired with minimal effort and resulting in only superficial change (*WB* 38). Donahoo correctly recognizes that “the motivation O'Connor saw lying behind” the propagation of this kind of inauthentic, immediate, superficial form of redemption was “the secular push of economics” (PP 51). Ultimately, “the promise of instantaneous conversion, whatever its religious trappings, is a tool for economic exploitation—an advertising lure whose value is not ‘truth’ but its ability to generate sales” (PP 52). Perhaps the best example of this to be found in *Wise Blood* is in the case of Hoover Shoats, who markets redemption as a commodity of convenience; and though he presents this in the guise of a true religion, it is, underneath, merely an exploitative scheme to make money.

Hoover Shoats is the most straightforward example of O'Connor's critique of the commodification of salvation. Shoats represents the pinnacle of the conflation of marketing and evangelical discourse, where the salesman and the preacher become one and the same. He advertises redemption as one would a modern gadget or a high-tech,

time-saving device that one can take pride in owning, a product that will set its owner apart from their neighbors. Moreover, he promises that this product—salvation—cannot only save your soul but can also make you more attractive and likeable. Shoats barks, “this church is up-to-date! When you’re in this church you can know that there’s nothing or nobody ahead of you” (*WB* 153). Here, redemption is marketed as a means of attaining superiority over those who do not yet possess this new technology. Using the rhetoric of 1950s advertising, Shoats promises that, by purchasing redemption, you can “win friends and [be] loved” for just “a few dimes” (*WB* 153). The preacher-salesman boasts that this is an extremely affordable and immediate means to achieving nothing less than communal acceptance, holistic self-realization, and even the right to an air of entitlement and superiority. He says, “it’ll cost you each a dollar, but what is a dollar? . . . Not much to unlock that little rose of sweetness inside you” (*WB* 153). Shoats and Hawks represent the pure distillation of consumer society’s usurpation of religious discourse and the way in which this transformation has wholly altered the way modern Americans conceive of the nature and purpose of redemption and the means by which one can achieve it. Redemption can be understood here in either the Christian sense or in the secular sense, as the deliverance from an empty and meaningless life onto the path to ultimate self-realization through the existential enrichment of one’s life. Either way, these characters embody a notion of redemption wholly corrupted by capitalist economy, a form of corruption O’Connor takes pains to critique by way of Motes’s abhorrence of this trend.

Hazel has an apparently radical aversion to this economy of redemption and to those who enter into it. He reviles the salesman at his profane “altar,” insisting that “it don’t cost you any money to know the truth” (*WB* 34, 154). Hazel sets his own church, one which “won’t cost you nothing to join,” apart from the unholy economy of redemption practiced by Hoover and Hawks, where you can seemingly buy your salvation monetarily or symbolically as though purchasing a commodity (*WB* 51). Hazel’s emphatic belief that redemption “don’t cost you any money” and that “you can’t know it for money,” suggests that, for him, you cannot come to the knowledge or

self-realization that redemption entails by simply purchasing it (*WB* 154). And yet, as in many other ways, Hazel fundamentally contradicts himself insofar as he enters into a similar economy, an economy of atonement, which he participates in through acts of self-mortification. Motes's ultimate inability to fully extricate himself from the logic of consumer society is what prevents him from being fully redeemed, either in the sacred or the secular sense.

3. THE ECONOMY OF ATONEMENT

Motes's self-blinding and his subsequent, ascetic regiment of self-mortification are interpreted by many as evidence of his repentance and redemption. Mrs. Flood finds that the shoes he wears on his interminable walks are "lined with gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone," and she later discovers that he sleeps with "three strands of barbed wire wrapped around his chest" (*WB* 226, 228). He explains that he does this in order "to pay," and when Mrs. Flood asks, "pay for what," he simply responds "it don't make no difference for what . . . I'm paying" (*WB* 226). While Hazel does not think that he can immediately attain redemption through a one-time purchase, he does conceive of his salvation in terms of economic debt. His sense of atonement is wholly pervaded by the logic of capitalism. Though he recognizes the inauthentic nature of Shoats's and Hawks's brand of redemption, he nevertheless continues to misunderstand humanity's relation to the divine as being "measured in terms of moral debt" (*SA* 84). For O'Connor, this recasting of the relation between the human and the divine in economic terms is further evidence of how consumerism deforms our perception of reality. It is this continued misconception that ultimately prevents Motes from being fully and authentically redeemed.

Hazel's self-blinding, though done in order "to pay," and therefore seemingly to repent, only serves to extend his previous effort to become wholly autonomous from both the divine and from others. Rather than transcending this former endeavor, it fully actualizes it by affecting a complete rejection of the material world and all those in it. According to O'Connor's notion that the material world is

equally as significant as the spiritual—a component of her incarnational conception of reality—this act is anything but a laudable one. By turning completely inward, Motes reaches the furthest limit of his egotism. In a letter, O'Connor describes the path to salvation as one where “you are continually turning inward toward God and away from your own egocentricity . . . you have to see this selfish side of yourself in order to turn away from it” (*HB* 430). It is precisely this moment of recognizing one's own egocentricity that Motes fails to experience. Susan Srigley writes,

even after blinding himself (and including his reasons for doing it) Hazel does not acknowledge his dependence on God for wholeness . . . he does not see . . . his connection to God as anything other than that of a debt to a debtor. In fact, Hazel's final desire to be rid of any debt he might owe, which dominates his thinking throughout the novel, is directed almost entirely toward gaining his autonomy rather than acknowledging his dependence. (*SA* 64)

In accord with her incarnational conception of reality, where the mundane and transcendent realms are equally significant and inextricably linked, O'Connor argues that rejecting the material world in favor of the spiritual or, in Hazel's case, for an escape into one's ego, is equally as deficient as rejecting the divine by becoming materialistic. The consumerist notion of an economy of redemption—practiced by characters like Enoch Emery and embodied by the salesmen-preachers—on the one hand, and the economy of atonement practiced by Hazel Motes on the other, are for O'Connor two modalities of the same process by which the logic and structure of capitalist exchange has pervaded our sense of salvation and distorted our perception of reality.

Donahoo argues that, “though Hazel does think of his penance in economic terms . . . he makes it clear that the object he seeks has no material existence. . . . Economic exchange and gain have ceased to be merely a goal or motivator; in reality they have ceased to matter at all” (*PP* 55). For Donahoo, Motes successfully “choose[s] to abandon

the economic system built on quick conversion of services and goods into profits" (PP 55). But, by making entry into his church free, which is what sets him apart from the likes of Shoats, it is clear that economic gain was never either a goal or a motivator. Conversely, the structure of capitalist exchange remains both the motivator and constituent form of Hazel's penance. While his goal is not literally a monetary one, it is nevertheless best understood in terms of capitalist economy, where Motes's service, his penitence, is converted into a profit, namely his redemption. In this sense, economy has come to matter more than ever for Motes.

Similarly, one may consider Motes's choice to merely throw away the money "left over" at the end of the month as evidence of his "new relation to economic matters," interpreting this as symbolic of his disposal of the ideology of consumerism, but this is not the case (PP 54). Motes no longer has a need for money because his medium of legal tender has changed. Though the content of his payment is different, the form remains that of commercial exchange. Insofar as he pays his debts in flesh rather than in faith, his is an even more radical form of materialism than those previously described. It is in this way that O'Connor argues that the rising power of consumer culture serves to obscure any method of relation—either to the divine, or to one another—other than one that is formally capitalist, where the material and the corporeal comprise its content.

Further, one may claim that, because the word redemption derives from the Latin meaning "buying back," and because, as theologian Alister McGrath tells us, "the scriptural use of 'redemption' corresponds to the everyday use of the word," this means that both in its biblical and common usage, redemption is a term that has always regarded economic exchange (72; hereafter cited parenthetically in the text as *TB*).³ Of course, it would be absurd to deny this, but we should consider the nature of this economic exchange to see what light this can shed on O'Connor's critique of consumerism's economy of redemption. The source of this theological concept originates in the New Testament and signifies the purpose and effect

³See also O'Collins 221.

of Christ's crucifixion. We are told there that redemption—in the form of Christ's crucifixion—was the ransom that was paid to the captor of man, the devil, in order to secure the liberation of humanity (*TB* 72). In this sense it is literally a "buying back." But if this is the case, in what sense is it inappropriate, according to O'Connor, for humanity to conceive of the achievement of redemption as a purchase? It would be helpful here to consider a scripture that is crucial to our understanding of the subtle distinction that O'Connor is considering in her representation of Hazel Motes and his emblematic misunderstanding of redemption. "Foreasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but by the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1.18–19). We are made to understand here that the individual has no need to, and indeed cannot, purchase redemption with silver and gold or with "corruptible things" such as commodities, because the price has already been paid with the blood of Christ. As Ralph C. Wood has put it, "no human payment is sufficiently generous to acknowledge the divine largesse. This deliverance costs . . . less than nothing because, as sheer grace, it is completely free" (105).

Motes is well aware of this biblical notion of redemption, as is evident when he describes his church as one "that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption," and in his desire for "a new kind of jesus . . . that can't waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he's all man and ain't got any God in him" (*WB* 101, 119). Motes desires a "jesus" that is of the material world alone, but this material, objectified "jesus" will still have divine significance insofar as it is to be the messianic figurehead of Motes's church. In effect, Motes desires to worship a new "jesus" that is—in the sense that it is a material production imbued with divine significance—a fetishized commodity. For O'Connor, a church without Christ, one that does not acknowledge the incarnational nature of reality, is one that is reduced to "the civic religion of laissez-faire capitalism" (*FS* 44).

For O'Connor, as long as Motes, and by association humanity at large, fails to recognize the incarnational significance of Christ as being the revelation of the necessary unity of the divine and the

corporeal, the material and the spiritual, one will inevitably fail to be redeemed. By putting himself in the authoritative position to buy back his liberation, Motes is occupying the place of God. For O'Connor, only God has the power to redeem, and as such Motes's occupation of the place of God is not only unnecessary but also profoundly idolatrous. In this way O'Connor suggests that it is the ideology of consumerism—which imbues man-made commodities with religious significance—that is to blame for the modern misunderstanding of the nature of redemption.

Though Hazel Motes immediately recognizes that Hoover Shoats's and Asa Hawks's brand of redemption has been corrupted by consumer culture, in many ways his own conception of salvation is equally shaped by the influence of capitalism. Insofar as he is unable to become liberated from this influence, Motes fails to be redeemed. But for O'Connor, this failure itself has a revelatory capacity. It is through our recognition of Motes's subtle contradictions that we come to realize our own complicity in the consumerist economy of redemption. In her prefatory note to the novel she asks, "[D]oes one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man" (*WB* iii). O'Connor suggests, then, that we must not understand Motes's failure to be redeemed in the traditional sense, as a defeat or a loss, but rather as a praiseworthy effort that, in his contention with his "many wills," reflects humanity's general struggle for the liberation of self-transcendence and the deliverance of redemption.

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