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Ralph C. Wood. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. Pp. xii + 272. \$22 (Cloth).

Susan Srigley. *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. Pp. ix + 195. \$42 (Cloth); \$20 (Paper).

[1] “Flannery O'Connor” appears in the title of two new books. Here end the similarities. Susan Srigley’s book is modest and focused; Ralph Wood’s is ambitious and wide-ranging. Srigley proposes to increase our knowledge of O'Connor, Wood to enlarge O'Connor’s relevance. Srigley directs us to O'Connor’s intellectual ancestry, Wood to her moral enemies. One book centers on O'Connor, the other circles around her.

[2] But Wood is forthright about this circling. *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* “seeks to demonstrate the immense social and religious relevance of Flannery O'Connor’s work” (2), to present not a “close literary examination” of O'Connor’s fiction but a consideration of her “work as it bears on the life of the contemporary church” (3).

[3] The book begins and ends in praise of the south. The first chapter, “A Roman Catholic at home in the Fundamentalist South,” argues that O'Connor, unimpressed by civil religion and certain that “something deadly had occurred when national identity had been made to trump religious faith” (18), regarded southern fundamentalism as “salutary and instructive” (49), in part because it bequeathed a “Bible-centered and Christ-haunted faith” (11). The last chapter, “Climbing into the Starry Field and Shouting Hallelujah,” argues that “O'Connor’s eschatological vision serves both to redeem and dismantle the hopelessness of our time” (253). Wood allows that the “Yankee gospel of progress and enlightenment” did at one time save “the nation from ruin.” But now, “[s]evered from the biblical story and the institutions it once sustained, the Divided States of America will founder and sink into the abyss that eventually will engulf all nations and cultures. Yet hope remains, the eschatological hope that Ruby Turpin encountered” in O'Connor’s late story, “Revelation” (265). This hope comes from God by way of the South.

[4] The intervening chapters concern the South in generally less adulatory refrain. The second, on the “burden” of southern history, is the first of three somewhat flummoxing chapters; it centers on those writers who defended the south against H. L. Mencken’s calling it the “Sahara of the Bozart” (51). Wood leaps from Mencken to Allen Tate to Eugene Genovese to Lewis P. Simpson to William Jennings Bryan to O’Connor in order to show that Mencken, the “brittle secularist[,] joined the crusty Catholic in seeing, as the Agrarians did not, that the real quandary for both the region and the nation - indeed, for the entirety of modernity - concerns the gospel” (52), with the difference, of course, that O’Connor believed it and Mencken did not.

[5] Chapters three and four are argumentatively moderate: in “The Problem of the Color Line,” Wood considers O’Connor’s putative racism and argues that O’Connor “was a writer who - though not without temptation and struggle - offered the one lasting antidote to racism” (94), namely, “the way of reconciliation between brothers and sisters of the same Lord” (119). In “The South as a Mannered and Mysteriously Redemptive Region,” Wood argues that manners are “the secular reflections and echoes of Christianity at work in Southern culture” (123), a “far-off reflection of God’s own incarnate love” (129), a sign of “the divine courtesy that, for all our unworthiness, makes us members of the divine court” (153).

[6] Chapters five and six, “Preaching as the Southern Protestant Sacrament” and “Demonic Nihilism: The Chief Moral Temptation of Modernity,” are the other two somewhat bewildering chapters, each interesting in its way but both, like chapter two, oddly pieced together. Five begins with the claim that the “answer” to “antisacramental gnosticism lies in” - of all places - “Karl Barth’s thesis that preaching serves as the Protestant sacrament.” It ends with the claim that one of O’Connor’s preachers, Lucette Carmody in *The Violent Bear it Away*, “calls both the church and the world to repentance and reconciliation” (155) and that she “shares Barth’s confidence that ‘God speaks and causes his Word to penetrate the hearts of the listeners by the Holy Spirit’” (176).

[7] Chapter six begins with the somewhat reductive claim that “O’Connor believed [as Wood clearly does] that the outward carnage of the modern world, as evidenced most notably in the Soviet Gulags and the Maoist Cultural Revolution, in the Holocaust and Hiroshima and Dresden, is the direct consequence of a massive inward nihilism. It shrinks souls before it destroys bodies” (179). This chapter has excellent discussions of freedom as “the liberty to do the will of God and not to do evil,” of biographical and Heideggerian material that impinge on “Good Country People,” and especially of O’Connor’s signal belief in the importance of preparing for a good death. But even as in the previous chapter we encounter the proposition that one of O’Connor’s characters, though she has never heard of Karl Barth, actually “shares Barth’s confidence” (true enough even if cast in language meant to show a bloodline where none exists - O’Connor owned one of Barth’s books and mentioned him infrequently if favorably), so we discover in this chapter that there is only one enemy, nihilism, and Heidegger must surely be a nihilist, because Hulga Hopewell underlines passages from one of his lectures.

[8] These two chapters are interesting nonetheless, and Wood is certainly clear about the circuitous routes he intends. But to say they are loosely stitched would be to admit the use of thread. Subheadings and bold-face type hold these and chapter two together.

[9] The penultimate chapter is merely controversial. Wood has prepared us for “Vocation: The Divine Summons to Drastic Witness” by saying early that the South, though it lost the Civil War, “won the spiritual war by retaining its truest legacy . . . [namely,] the Bible-centered and Christ-haunted faith that it still bequeaths to the churches and the nations as their last, best, and only true hope” (11). Such a faith requires our aligning our sense of vocation with O’Connor’s own, which on Wood’s account involves an “urgency” to recover Christendom, to do so “with the requisite vehemence and intolerance” of a Mason Tarwater and with a rejection of Rayber’s “intolerant humanism” (a miscarriage of the Enlightenment), in order to bear “drastic witness concerning abortion” and achieve a “willing mortification of the sinful flesh” and “the purity of heart that enables true sexuality” (218).

[10] Wood’s book is often a delight, perhaps because of how unapologetically it serves as his pulpit. And his usual humor abounds: Tarwater eats six barbecue sandwiches and drinks three beers - “the ultimate redneck feast” (192); “If Henry Louis Mencken had not existed,” Wood says, “it would have been necessary for Southerners to invent him” (53); many liberal Christians believed that “the kingdom of heaven would indeed occur on earth, under the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man - specifically in the neighborhood of Boston” (251). Nor is there anything finally objectionable in the belief that it is not so much we who teach literature as literature that teaches us. But to be plain: Wood’s book collects into a single volume the exemplary intellectual deeds and follies of the author’s favorite friends and foes. O’Connor is not the object of his study; she is its occasion.

[11] Susan Srigley’s debut, *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art*, has none of the polemical buckshot of Wood’s book and therefore little of its verve. And whereas Wood will not so much as split an infinitive, Srigley dangles the occasional modifier and sometimes falls into imprecision. But aside from these and a few other sentence-level deficiencies, Srigley’s book offers something new and useful to the field. Like Wood’s book, it moves toward a statement on one of O’Connor’s late stories, “Revelation.” It intends to show the ethical implications of O’Connor’s sacramental vision; its “primary aim . . . is to elucidate O’Connor’s sacramental vision with reference to her theological and philosophical sources and to show how this sacramental vision is embodied within her fiction as an ethic of responsibility” (2). “Embodied” is a word we meet too often here and elsewhere, but Srigley’s identification of sources is very useful. They are, in the main, Aquinas, Maritain, and St. Catherine of Genoa, and Srigley clearly demonstrates their relevance. She centers her analysis on *Wise Blood*, *The Violent Bear it Away*, and “Revelation” and detects in these a development, a movement from the grotesque to the purgatorial that suggests a change in O’Connor’s own understanding of “how the love of human beings, known and lived as responsibility for others, is the way to know and love God” (163).

[12] The burden of Srigley’s first chapter, “Sacramental Theology and Incarnational Art,” is to show that “reality is morally ordered by love and that the response to love is the moral basis of all action” (54). Srigley is generally good on how both theology and art reveal a

moral vision but she is especially good on the sources impinging upon O'Connor's own moral aesthetic. O'Connor learned from Baron Friedrich von Hügel that "If there is one danger for religion" it is that which allows "the fascinations of Grace to deaden or to ignore the beauties and duties of Nature" (23). From St. Thomas Aquinas, via Jacques Maritain, she learned that "art is a virtue" that is "always inclined toward the good" (25), that reason "serves and not substitutes for revelation" - O'Connor's own words (30) - and that "while art is the imaginative 'making' of the practical intellect, morality, or ethics, is the 'doing' of the practical intellect through love" (35). O'Connor also learned from Aquinas, as she herself said, "that prophetic vision is dependent on the imagination of the prophet, not his moral life" (43) - a distinction obviously important in *The Violent Bear it Away*, for, as Srigley shows, the prophet, though morally suspect, must have faith and knowledge and vision to see what is spiritually, not chronologically, distant (44-5). Srigley rightly notes that this means O'Connor's fiction has more than a moral interest: "in the classical understanding morality and art are not opposed; they merely have different proximate ends" (29).

[13] The second chapter, "Moral Vision and the Grotesque," ventures the greatest risk in Srigley's book inasmuch as it offers a reading of *Wise Blood* generally unconcerned with the novel's comedic structure. An analysis of three features in particular - Hazel's car, the names given to the church Hazel preaches, and his act of self-blinding - leads Srigley to conclude that Hazel remains lost in a version of his mother's self-fashioned religion. Hazel's blinding "himself physically brings him into accord with his spiritual blindness, and could be interpreted as his rebellion against a spiritual order of reality that he will not accept" (86). This may be so, but then perhaps Hazel's right *and* left eyes offend him.

[14] We should at least note that Srigley's reading of Hazel accords with her thesis: if sacramental vision necessarily leads to a love for God manifest in love for others, then Hazel, self-absorbed in his own self-inflicted blindness, lacks such a vision, and therefore his redemption is doubtful at best. He shows no signs of loving others and therefore "cannot come to a redeeming vision of God" (91). And O'Connor did say that "self-torture is abnormal, asceticism is not" (91).

[15] "The Violence of Love," Srigley's chapter on *The Violent Bear it Away*, is a reading of the novel and an explanation of its title predicated on Christian asceticism as O'Connor knew it. It reminds us that O'Connor saw "the violence of love in the ascetics' language of spiritual warfare, which is not about external violence but about the internal struggle against the powers of anger, hostility, violence, cruelty, lust, and so on" (99); asceticism is a "spiritual discipline that subdues the selfish will in the interest of others" (104). Srigley is very good here on the ascetic notion of love as a kind of violence - a holy, inner violence, a "bearing of responsibility and a quelling of natural pride"; the "ascetic impulse is an attempt to absorb, or to take responsibility for, the violence inflicted on the Kingdom of Heaven" (102). So the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away (Matt 11:12): the kingdom of heaven endures violence inflicted from without, but the ascetics - those who are "violent" because they are possessed of an inner love that is *like* violence - bear the inflicted violence away. The ascetics, by a holy love, absorb violence, put an end to it. Young Tarwater must become such an ascetic; he must absorb the evil and bear it away. To do so, he must baptize Bishop - that is, confer dignity upon him and responsibility upon himself. But he is like a man to double business bound, caught between two kinds of violence. By

murdering Bishop, Tarwater inflicts violence; by accepting his vocation as prophet, he absorbs it, bears it away. Tarwater is wracked, then, not by the problem of belief - unbelief being the “essence of evil” for Wood, St. Paul, and Karl Barth (Wood 182); he is wracked by love.

[16] “Purgatorial Visions,” the last chapter, concerns “Revelation”; Srigley’s reading of it is an anti-psychoanalytic attempt to account for the story as a “purgatorial vision” - O’Connors phrase (135) - with respect to O’Connor’s source, namely, St. Catherine of Genoa, the late-fifteenth, early-sixteenth-century mystic whose treatise on purgatory O’Connor knew. As with Maritain and Aquinas, so with St. Catherine: Srigley is very helpful. She persuasively shows that O’Connor attempted in “Revelation” to dramatize a purgatorial vision *in the flesh* - not a redemption but a purgation of self-love. “This point is not mere pedantry; there is a difference between the nature of the experiences, and O’Connor explicitly names this vision as purgatorial” (146). Srigley notes that O’Connor wanted to “deepen the meaning of the vision so that Ruby is not simply dismissed as a bigot who gets what she deserves” (147). O’Connor accomplishes this in Ruby’s purgatorial vision, which is “a movement within the soul, either closer [to] or further from God, depending on one’s degree of self-love. The purgatorial experience, as St. Catherine describes it, is the burning away of our excess self-love as we approach God” (158). Srigley’s pronouncement on Ruby: she comes to know herself before God. “The spiritual purging Ruby experiences is mirrored by what she observes, namely, the faces ‘shocked and altered’ from ‘even their virtues . . . being burned away’” (158). Srigley sees in this evidence of an O’Connor different from the one who wrote *Wise Blood*.

[17] Srigley’s mind is mightier than her pen at this point, but her pen has made a palpable contribution and given us promise of more good work to come.

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