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# *Flannery O'Connor Collection*

FOREWORD *by* BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

EDITED *by* MATTHEW BECKLO

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# FOREWORD

by Bishop Robert Barron

Years ago, I assigned Flannery O'Connor's masterpiece, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, to the students in my Doctor of Ministry class. None of these men and women, all involved in pastoral work, had ever read anything of O'Connor's. When I returned the following week to lead a discussion of the work, one of the women in the group, an extremely bright and focused lady, glared at me and with real irritation said, "How could you have made us read that awful story?"

It was not an unusual reaction to one's first reading of Flannery O'Connor. Perhaps it is the incongruity between author and text that produces this effect: a genteel lady from the South and stories marked by mayhem, deceit, shocking violence, perverse motivations, and sudden death. Or maybe it is the disconnect between O'Connor's much-touted Catholicism and her tales, in which Catholics rarely appear and which seem fraught with spiritual aridity, even despair. When asked to identify a key quality of her work, O'Connor herself reached for the category of the grotesque; but why, a first reader of her narratives might wonder, is a nice Catholic lady dealing in the grotesque?

I wonder whether I might offer an interpretive suggestion by glancing at three contemporary filmmakers whose sensibilities strike me as distinctively O'Connoresque. I'm talking about Quentin Tarantino and Joel and Ethan Coen. These three gentlemen make films that are, in the O'Connor mode, filled with bloodshed, deep perversion, and black humor. But most of their movies are, at the same time, stories of redemption and of the odd breakthrough of grace in even the most hopeless

situations. In a pivotal scene from Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, for example, Butch, a washed-up boxer played by Bruce Willis, breaks free of his torturers and has every opportunity to flee to safety, but elects (at great risk to himself) to return to help the man who was being tortured with him—even though that man had, just minutes before, been actively trying to kill him. When the ordeal is finally over, the hero mounts a motorcycle and makes his escape, but Tarantino allows us to see that painted on the engine of the vehicle is the simple word "grace." In the Coen brothers' masterful movie *Fargo*, two bumbling but lethal kidnappers leave a trail of bodies in their wake. After them comes Marge, the female sheriff of the town, who is wickedly smart, massively pregnant, and one of the most luminously decent characters in recent cinema. True to her name, she goes to the margins, bringing justice to the most twisted places and bearing light to the darkest corners. The very exaggeration of wickedness in the stories told by these filmmakers allows the moments of luminosity to shine with particular intensity.

And this is the Flannery O'Connor technique. When asked once about the prominence of evil and perversion in her stories, she replied, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." She meant that in a time when a pervasive secularism was threatening to undermine a spiritual view of the world, the serious Catholic writer had to trade in strong, even shocking, narratives and characters. Modern people, she was convinced, might be able to appreciate the working of God only when it is set, jewel-like, against a very black background. Thus, for example, in the story that so upset my student, a fussy, self-absorbed grandmother is saved precisely through the intervention of a desperate murderer. And the sign of her salvation is the smile worn on her dead face just after he shot her. In O'Connor's magnificent tale *Revelation*, an utterly self-righteous lady called Mrs. Turpin experiences the presence of God when an unpleasant young lady throws a book at her and knocks her to the ground. When the dust settles, we learn the girl's name: Mary Grace. In a characteristically pithy and illuminating remark, Flannery herself said that her stories

are about "a moment of grace . . . a moment where it is offered, and is usually rejected." Mind you, this doesn't mean that she had a despairing view of the spiritual order; just the contrary. But just as James Joyce saw his writing as the reporting of "epiphanies," special moments of beauty and illumination, she appreciated her stories as descriptions of what God's grace looks like when it breaks into a world gone deeply awry. Her fondest hope, it seems to me, was to instruct us in this peculiar mode of manifestation so that we might become more adept at noticing it when it happens.

As becomes unmistakably clear as you read through this collection, Flannery O'Connor was not only a masterful teller of tales; she was also one of the most perceptive literary theorists of the twentieth century. She once famously defined herself as a "hillbilly Thomist," and the aesthetics of St. Thomas Aquinas do indeed inform the way she thought about her own work. For Thomas, morality is *recta ratio agibilium* (right reason in regard to things to be done), and art is *recta ratio factibilium* (right reason in regard to what is to be made). A work of art—be it a chair, a fresco, or a cathedral—is beautiful in the measure that it is done according to the intelligible principles that rightly govern its making. When so many artists were under the sway of modern subjectivism—art expresses the feeling of the artist—Flannery O'Connor exulted in Aquinas' bracing objectivism. She saw herself accordingly as a craftsman, making stories the way a carpenter makes an aesthetically pleasing and useful table.

A final quality to which I would like to draw attention is O'Connor's sense of humor, on fairly ample display in her fiction but positively pouring out of her letters. She could be just silly and playful, but more often than not, her humor is edgy, sly. One of my favorite examples—present in this collection—is the exchange between her and her mother, Regina:

> My mamma and I have interesting literary discussions like the following which took place over some Modern Library books that I had just ordered:

SHE: "*Mobby Dick*. I've always heard about that."
ME: "*Mow-by Dick*."
SHE: "*Mow-by Dick*. *The Idiot*. You would get something called *Idiot*. What's it about?"
ME: "An idiot."

I do believe that a key to her humor is that she saw everything, finally, from the standpoint of God's providence. She understood that this admittedly dark world is ingredient in a comedy of God's design.

Upon her death at the age of thirty-nine, Thomas Merton made an extraordinary comment: "When I read Flannery O'Connor, I do not think of Hemingway, or Katherine Anne Porter, or Sartre, but rather of someone like Sophocles. What more can be said of a writer? I write her name with honor, for all the truth and all the craft with which she shows man's fall and his dishonor." I knew that quote before I ever read a word of O'Connor's writing; thus, it served as a sort of interpretive key as I commenced my exploration of her work. May it function in the same way for you as you read through this volume.

# PART ONE

SHORT STORY

# *The Peeler*

Hazel Motes walked along downtown, close to the store fronts but not looking at them. His neck was thrust forward as if he were trying to smell something that was always being drawn away. He had on a blue suit that was glare-blue in the day time, but looked purplish with the night lights on it, and his hat was a fierce black wool hat like a preacher's hat. The stores in Taulkinham stayed open on Thursday nights and a lot of people were shopping. Haze's shadow was now behind him and now before him and now and then broken up by other people's shadows, but when it was by itself, stretching behind him, it was a thin nervous shadow walking backwards.

After a while he stopped where a lean-faced man had a card table set up in front of a Lerner's Dress Shop and was demonstrating a potato peeler. The man had on a small canvas hat and a shirt patterned with bunches of upsidedown pheasants and quail and bronze turkeys. He was pitching his voice under the street noises so that it reached every ear distinctly as in a private conversation. A few people gathered around. There were two buckets on the card table, one empty and the other full of potatoes. Between the two buckets there was a pyramid of green cardboard boxes and on top of the stack, one peeler was open for demonstration. The man stood in front of this altar, pointing over it at different people. "How about you?" he said, pointing at a damp-haired

pimpled boy, "you ain't gonna let one of these go by?" He stuck a brown potato in one side of the open machine. The machine was a square tin box with a red handle, and as he turned the handle, the potato went into the box and then in a second, backed out the other side, white. "You ain't gonna let one of these go by!" he said.

The boy guffawed and looked at the other people gathered around. He had yellow slick hair and a fox-shaped face.

"What's yer name?" the peeler man asked.

"Name Enoch Emery," the boy said and snuffled.

"Boy with a pretty name like that ought to have one of these," the man said, rolling his eyes, trying to warm up the others. Nobody laughed but the boy. Then a man standing across from Hazel Motes laughed. He was a tall man with light green glasses and a black suit and a black wool hat like a preacher's hat, and he was leaning on a white cane. The laugh sounded as if it came from something tied up in a croker sack. It was evident he was a blind man. He had his hand on the shoulder of a big-boned child with a black knitted cap pulled down low on her forehead and a fringe of orange hair sticking out from it on either side. She had a long face and a short sharp nose. The people began to look at the two of them instead of the man selling peelers. This irritated the man selling peelers. "How about you, you there," he said, pointing at Hazel Motes. "You'll never be able to get a bargain like this in any store."

"Hey!" Enoch Emery said, reaching across a woman and punching Haze's arm. "He's talking to you! He's talking to you!" Haze was looking at the blind man and the child. Enoch Emery had to punch him again.

"Whyn't you take one of these home to yer wife?" the peeler man was saying.

"I ain't none," Haze muttered without drawing his attention from the blind man.

"Well, you got a dear old mother, ain't you?"

"No."

"Well shaw," the man said, with his hand cupped to the people, "he needs one theseyer just to keep him company."

Enoch Emery thought that was so funny that he leaned over and slapped his knee, but Hazel Motes didn't look as if he had heard it yet. "I'm going to give away half a dozen peeled potatoes to the first person purchasing one theseyer machines," the man said. "Who's gonna step up first? Only a dollar and a half for a machine'd cost you three dollars in any store!" Enoch Emery began fumbling in his pockets. "You'll thank the day you ever stopped here," the man said, "you'll never forget it. Ever one of you people purchasing one theseyer machines'll never forget it."

The blind man began to move straight forward suddenly and the peeler man got ready to hand him one of the green boxes, but he went past the card table and turned, moving at a right angle back in among the people. He was handing something out. Then Haze saw that the child was moving around too, giving out white leaflets. There were not many people gathered there, but the ones who were began to move off. When the machine-seller saw this, he leaned, glaring, over the card table. "Hey you!" he yelled at the blind man, "what you think you doing? Who you think you are, running people off from here?"

The blind man didn't pay him any mind. He kept on handing out the pamphlets. He handed one at Enoch Emery and then he came toward Haze, hitting the white cane at an angle from his leg.

"What the hell you think you doing?" the man selling peelers yelled. "I got these people together, how you think you can horn in?"

The blind man had a peculiar boiled looking red face. He thrust one of the pamphlets a little to the side of Haze and Haze grabbed it. It was a tract. The words on the outside of it said, "Jesus Calls You."

"I'd like to know who the hell you think you are!" the man with the peelers was yelling. The child passed the card table again and handed him a tract. He looked at it for an instant with his lip curled, and then he charged around the card table, upsetting the bucket of potatoes. "These damn Jesus fanatics," he yelled, glaring around, trying to find the blind man. More people had gathered, hoping to see a disturbance, and the blind man had disappeared among them. "These goddam Communist

Jesus Foreigners!" the peeler man screamed. "I got this crowd together!" He stopped, realizing there was a crowd.

"Listen folks," he said, "one at a time, there's plenty to go around, just don't push, a half dozen peeled potatoes to the first person stepping up to buy." He got back behind the card table quietly and started holding up the peeler boxes. "Step on up, plenty to go around," he said, "no need to crowd."

Hazel Motes didn't open his tract. He looked at the outside of it and then he tore it across. He put the two pieces together and tore them across again. He kept restacking the pieces and tearing them again until he had a little handful of confetti. He turned his hand over and let the shredded leaflet sprinkle to the ground. Then he looked up and saw the blind man's child not three feet away, watching him. Her mouth was open and her eyes glittered on him like two chips of green bottle glass. She had on a black dress and there was a white gunny sack hung over her shoulder. Haze scowled and began rubbing his sticky hands on his pants.

"I seen you," she said. Then she moved quickly over to where the blind man was standing now, beside the card table. Most of the people had moved off.

The peeler man leaned over the card table and said, "Hey!" to the blind man. "I reckon that showed you. Trying to horn in." But the blind man stood there with his chin tilted back slightly as if he saw something over their heads.

"Lookerhere," Enoch Emery said, "I ain't got but a dollar sixteen cent but I. . . ."

"Yah," the man said, as if he were going to make the blind man see him, "I reckon that'll show you you can't muscle in on me. Sold eight peelers, sold. . . ."

"Give me one of them," the child said, pointing to the peelers.

"Hanh?" he said.

She reached in her pocket and drew out a long coin purse and opened it. "Give me one of them," she said, holding out two fifty cent pieces.

The man eyed the money with his mouth hiked on one side. "A buck fifty, sister," he said.

She pulled her hand in quickly and all at once glared around at Hazel Motes as if he had made a noise at her. The blind man was moving off. She stood a second glaring red-faced at Haze and then she turned and followed the blind man. Haze started suddenly.

"Listen," Enoch Emery said, "I ain't got but a dollar sixteen cent and I want me one of them. . . ."

"You can keep it," the man said, taking the bucket off the card table. "This ain't no cut-rate joint."

Hazel Motes stood staring after the blind man, jerking his hands in and out of his pockets. He looked as if he were trying to move forward and backward at the same time. Then suddenly he thrust two bills at the man selling peelers and snatched a box off the card table and started down the street. In just a second Enoch Emery was panting at his elbow.

"My, I reckon you got a heap of money," Enoch Emery said. Haze turned the corner and saw them about a block ahead of him. Then he slowed down some and saw Enoch Emery there. Enoch had on a yellowish white suit with a pinkish white shirt and his tie was a greenpeaish color. He was grinning. He looked like a friendly hound dog with light mange. "How long you been here?" he inquired.

"Two days," Haze muttered.

"I been here two months," Enoch said. "I work for the city. Where you work?"

"Not working," Haze said.

"That's too bad," Enoch said. "I work for the city." He skipped a step to get in line with Haze, then he said, "I'm eighteen year old and I ain't been here but two months and I already work for the city."

"That's fine," Haze said. He pulled his hat down farther on the side Enoch Emery was on and walked faster.

"I didn't ketch your name good," Enoch said.

Haze said his name.

"You look like you might be follering them hicks," Enoch remarked. "You go in for a lot of Jesus?"

"No," Haze said.

"No, me neither, not much," Enoch agreed. "I went to thisyer Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy for four weeks. Thisyer woman that traded me from my daddy she sent me; she was a Welfare woman. Jesus, four weeks and I thought I was gonna be sanctified crazy."

Haze walked to the end of the block and Enoch stayed all the time at his elbow, panting and talking. When Haze started across the street, Enoch yelled, "Don't you see theter light! That means you got to wait!" A cop blew a whistle and a car blasted its horn and stopped short. Haze went on across, keeping his eyes on the blind man in the middle of the block. The policeman kept blowing the whistle. He crossed the street over to where Haze was and stopped him. He had a thin face and oval-shaped yellow eyes.

"You know what that little thing hanging up there is for?" he asked, pointing to the traffic light over the intersection.

"I didn't see it," Haze said.

The policeman looked at him without saying anything. A few people stopped. He rolled his eyes at them. "Maybe you thought the red ones was for white folks and the green ones for colored," he said.

"Yeah, I thought that," Haze said. "Take your hand off me."

The policeman took his hand off and put it on his hip. He backed one step away and said, "You tell all your friends about these lights. Red is to stop, green is to go—men and women, white folks and niggers, all go on the same light. You tell all your friends so when they come to town, they'll know." The people laughed.

"I'll look after him," Enoch Emery said, pushing in by the policeman. "He ain't been here but only two days. I'll look after him."

"How long you been here?" the cop asked.

"I was born and raised here," Enoch said. "This is my ole home town. I'll take care of him for you. Hey wait!" he yelled at Haze. "Wait on me!" He pushed out the crowd and caught up with him. "I reckon I saved you that time," he said.

"I'm obliged," Haze said.

"It wasn't nothing," Enoch said. "Why don't we go in Walgreen's and get us a soda? Ain't no nightclubs open this early."

"I don't like no drugstores," Haze said. "Goodby."

"That's all right," Enoch said. "I reckon I'll go along and keep you company for a while." He looked up ahead at the couple and said, "I sho wouldn't want to get messed up with no hicks this time of night, particularly the Jesus kind. I done had enough of them myself. Thisyer woman that traded me from my daddy didn't do nothing but pray. Me and daddy, we moved around with a sawmill where we worked and it set up outside Boonville one summer and here come thisyer woman." He caught hold of Haze's coat. "Only objection I got to Taulkinham is there's too many people on the street," he said confidentially, "look like they ain't satisfied until they knock you down—well, here she come and I reckon she took a fancy to me. I was twelve year old and I could sing some hymns good I learnt off a nigger. So here she comes taking a fancy to me and traded me off my daddy and took me to Boonville to live with her. She had a brick house but it was Jesus all day long." While he was talking he was looking up at Haze, studying his face. All of a sudden he bumped into a little man lost in a pair of faded overalls. "Whyn't you look where you going?" he growled.

The little man stopped short and raised his arm in a vicious gesture and a mean dog look came on his face. "Who you tellin what?" he snarled.

"You see," Enoch said, jumping to catch up with Haze, "all they want to do is knock you down. I ain't never been to such a unfriendly place before. Even with that woman. I stayed with her for two months in that house of hers," he went on, "and then come fall she sent me to the Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy and I thought that sho was gonna be

some relief. This woman was hard to get along with—she wasn't old, I reckon she was forty year old—but she sho was ugly. She had theseyer brown glasses and her hair was so thin it looked like ham gravy trickling over her skull. I thought it was gonna be some certain relief to get to that Academy. I had run away oncet on her and she got me back and come to find out she had papers on me and she could send me to the penitentiary if I didn't stay with her so I sho was glad to get to theter Academy. You ever been to a academy?"

Haze didn't seem to hear the question. He still had his eye on the blind man in the next block.

"Well, it won't no relief," Enoch said. "Good Jesus, it won't no relief. I run away from there after four weeks and durn if she didn't get me back and brought me to that house of hers again. I got out though." He waited a minute. "You want to know how?"

After a second he said, "I scared hell out of that woman, that's how. I studied on it and studied on it. I even prayed. I said, 'Jesus, show me the way to get out of here without killing thisyer woman and getting sent to the penitentiary.' And durn if He didn't. I got up one morning at just daylight and I went in her room without my pants on and pulled the sheet off her and giver a heart attackt. Then I went back to my daddy and we ain't seen hide of her since.

"Your jaw just crawls," he observed, watching the side of Haze's face. "You don't never laugh. I wouldn't be surprised if you wasn't a real wealthy man."

Haze turned down a side street. The blind man and the girl were on the corner a block ahead.

"Well, I reckon we gonna ketch up with em after all," Enoch said. "Ain't that girl ugly, though? You seen them shoes she has on? Men's shoes, looks like. You know many people here?"

"No," Haze said.

"You ain't gonna know none neither. This is one more hard place to make friends in. I been here two months and I don't know nobody, look like all they want to do is knock you down. I reckon you got a right

heap of money," he said. "I ain't got none. Had, I'd sho know what to do with it." The man and the girl stopped on the corner and turned up the left side of the street. "We catching up," he said. "I bet we'll be at some meeting singing hymns with her and her daddy if we don't watch out."

Up in the next block there was a large building with columns and a dome. The blind man and the child were going toward it. There was a car parked in every space around the building and on the other side the street and up and down the streets near it. "That ain't no picture show," Enoch said. The blind man and the girl turned up the steps to the building. The steps went all the way across the front, and on either side there were stone lions sitting on pedestals. "Ain't no church," Enoch said. Haze stopped at the steps. He looked as if he were trying to settle his face into an expression. He pulled the black hat forward at a nasty angle and started toward the two, who had sat down in the corner by one of the lions.

As they came nearer the blind man leaned forward as if he were listening to the footsteps, then he stood up, holding a tract out in his hand.

"Sit down," the child said in a loud voice. "It ain't nobody but them two boys."

"Nobody but us," Enoch Emery said. "Me and him been follerin you all about a mile."

"I knew somebody was following me," the blind man said. "Sit down."

"They ain't here for nothing but to make fun," the child said. She looked as if she smelled something bad. The blind man was feeling out to touch them. Haze stood just out of reach of his hands, squinting at him as if he were trying to see the empty eye sockets under the green glasses.

"It ain't me, it's him," Enoch said. "He's been running after yawl ever since back yonder by them potato peelers. We bought one of em."

"I knew somebody was following me!" the blind man said. "I felt it all the way back yonder."

"I ain't followed you," Haze said. He felt the peeler box in his hand and looked at the girl. The black knitted cap came down almost to her eyes. She looked as if she might be thirteen or fourteen years old. "I ain't followed you nowhere," he said sourly. "I followed her." He stuck the peeler box out at her.

She jumped back and looked as if she were going to swallow her face. "I don't want that thing," she said. "What you think I want with that thing? Take it. It ain't mine. I don't want it!"

"I take it with thanks for her," the blind man said. "Put it in your sack," he said to her.

Haze thrust the peeler at her again, but he was still looking at the blind man.

"I won't have it," she muttered.

"Take it like I told you," the blind man said shortly.

After a second she took it and shoved it in the sack where the tracts were. "It ain't mine," she said. "I don't want none of it. I got it but it ain't mine."

"She thanks you for it," the blind man said. "I knew somebody was following me."

"I ain't followed you nowhere," Haze said. "I followed her to say I ain't beholden for none of her fast eye like she gave me back yonder." He didn't look at her, he looked at the blind man.

"What do you mean?" she shouted. "I never gave you no fast eye. I only watch you tearing up that tract. He tore it up in little pieces," she said, pushing the blind man's shoulder. "He tore it up and sprinkled it over the ground like salt and wiped his hands on his pants."

"He followed me," the blind man said. "Wouldn't anybody follow you. I can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice."

"Jesus," Haze muttered, "my Jesus." He sat down by the girl's leg. His head was at her knee and he set his hand on the step next to her foot. She had on men's shoes and black cotton stockings. The shoes were laced up tight and tied in precise bows. She moved herself away roughly and sat down behind the blind man.

"Listen at his cursing," she said in a low tone. "He never followed you."

"Listen," the blind man said, "you can't run away from Jesus. Jesus is a fact. If who you're looking for is Jesus, the sound of it will be in your voice."

"I don't hear nothing in his voice," Enoch Emery said. "I know a whole heap about Jesus because I attended thisyer Rodemill Boys' Bible Academy that a woman sent me to. If it was anything about Jesus in his voice I could certainly hear it." He had got up onto the lion's back and he was sitting there sideways cross-legged.

The blind man reached out again and his hands suddenly covered Haze's face. For a second Haze didn't move or make any sound. Then he knocked the hands off. "Quit it," he said in a faint voice. "You don't know nothing about me."

"You got a secret need," the blind man said. "Them that know Jesus once can't escape Him in the end."

"I ain't never known Him," Haze said.

"You got a least knowledge," the blind man said. "That's enough. You know His name and you're marked. If Jesus has marked you there ain't nothing you can do about it. Them that have knowledge can't swap it for ignorance." He was leaning forward but in the wrong direction so that he appeared to be talking to the step below Haze's foot. Haze sat leaning backward with the black hat tilted forward over his face.

"My daddy looks just like Jesus," Enoch said from the lion's back. "His hair hangs to his shoulders. Only difference is he's got a scar acrost his chin. I ain't never seen who my mother is."

"You're marked with knowledge," the blind man said. "You know what sin is and only them that know what it is can commit it. I knew all the time we were walking here somebody was following me," he said. "You couldn't have followed her. Wouldn't anybody follow her. I could feel there was somebody near with an urge for Jesus."

"There ain't nothing for your pain but Jesus," the girl said suddenly. She leaned forward and stuck her arm out with her finger pointed

at Haze's shoulder, but he spat down the steps and didn't look at her. "Listen," she said in a louder voice, "this here man and woman killed this little baby. It was her own child but it was ugly and she never give it any love. This child had Jesus and this woman didn't have nothing but good looks and a man she was living in Sin with. She sent the child away and it come back and she sent it away again and it come back again and ever time she sent it away it come back to where her and this man was living in Sin. They strangled it with a silk stocking and hung it up in the chimney. It didn't give her any peace after that, though. Everything she looked at was that child. Jesus made it beautiful to haunt her. She couldn't lie with that man without she saw it, staring through the chimney at her, shining through the brick in the middle of the night." She moved her feet around so that just the tips of them stuck out from her skirt which she had pulled tight around her legs. "She didn't have nothing but good looks," she said in a loud fast voice. "That ain't enough. No sirree."

"My Jesus," Haze said.

"It ain't enough," she repeated.

"I hear them scraping their feet inside there," the blind man said. "Get out the tracts, they're fixing to come out."

"What we gonna do?" Enoch asked. "What's inside theter building?"

"A program letting out," the blind man said. The child took the tracts out the gunny sack and gave him two bunches of them, tied with a string. "You and Enoch Emery go over on that side and give out," he said to her. "Me and this boy'll stay over here."

"He don't have no business touching them," she said. "He don't want to do nothing but shred them up."

"Go like I told you," the blind man said.

She stood there a second, scowling. Then she said, "You come on if you're coming," to Enoch Emery and Enoch jumped off the lion and followed her over to the other side.

The blind man was reaching forward. Haze ducked to the side but the blind man was next to him on the step with his hand clamped around his arm. He leaned forward so that he was facing Haze's knee and he said in a fast whisper, "You followed me here because you're in Sin but you can be a testament to the Lord. Repent! Go to the head of the stairs and renounce your sins and distribute these tracts to the people," and he thrust the stack of pamphlets into Haze's hand.

Haze jerked his arm away but he only pulled the blind man nearer. "Listen," he said, "I'm as clean as you are."

"Fornication," the blind man said.

"That ain't nothing but a word," Haze said. "If I was in Sin I was in it before I ever committed any. Ain't no change come in me." He was trying to pry the fingers off from around his arm but the blind man kept wrapping them tighter. "I don't believe in Sin," he said. "Take your hand off me."

"You do," the blind man said, "you're marked."

"I ain't marked," Haze said, "I'm free."

"You're marked free," the blind man said. "Jesus loves you and you can't escape his mark. Go to the head of the stairs and. . . ."

Haze jerked his arm free and jumped up. "I'll take them up there and throw them over into the bushes," he said. "You be looking! See can you see."

"I can see more than you!" the blind man shouted. "You got eyes and see not, ears and hear not, but Jesus'll make you see!"

"You be watching if you can see!" Haze said, and started running up the steps. People were already coming out the auditorium doors and some were halfway down the steps. He pushed through them with his elbows out like sharp wings and when he got to the top, a new surge of them pushed him back almost to where he had started up. He fought through them again until somebody hollered, "Make room for this idiot!" and people got out of his way. He rushed to the top and pushed his way over to the side and stood there, glaring and panting.

"I never followed him," he said aloud. "I wouldn't follow a blind fool like that. My Jesus." He stood against the building, holding the stack of leaflets by the string. A fat man stopped near him to light a cigar, and Haze pushed his shoulder. "Look down yonder," he said. "See that blind man down there, he's giving out tracts. Jesus. You ought to see him and he's got this here ugly child dressed up in woman's clothes, giving them out too. My Jesus."

"There's always fanatics," the fat man said, moving on.

"My Jesus," Haze said. He leaned forward near an old woman with orange hair and a collar of red wooden beads. "You better get on the other side, lady," he said. "There's a fool down there giving out tracts." The crowd behind the old woman pushed her on, but she looked at him for an instant with two bright flea eyes. He started toward her through the people but she was already too far away, and he pushed back to where he had been standing against the wall. "Sweet Jesus Christ crucified," he said, and felt something turn in his chest. The crowd was moving fast. It was like a big spread ravelling and the separate threads disappeared down the dark streets until there was nothing left of it and he was standing on the porch of the auditorium by himself. The tracts were speckled all over the steps and on the sidewalk and out into the street. The blind man was standing down on the first step, bent over, feeling for the crumpled pamphlets scattered around him. Enoch Emery was over on the other side, standing on the lion's head and trying to balance himself, and the child was picking up the pamphlets that were not too crushed to use again and putting them back in the gunny sack.

I don't need no Jesus, Haze said. I don't need no Jesus. I got Leora Watts.

He ran down the steps to where the blind man was, and stopped. He stood there for a second just out of reach of his hands which had begun to grope forward, hunting the sound of his step, and then he started across the street. He was on the other side before the voice pierced after him. He turned and saw the blind man standing in the middle of the street, shouting, "Shrike! Shrike! My name is Asa Shrike

when you want me!" A car had to swerve to the side to keep from hitting him.

Haze drew his head down nearer his hunched shoulders and went on quickly. He didn't look back until he heard the footsteps coming behind him.

"Now that we got shut of them," Enoch Emery panted, "whyu't we go sommer and have us some fun?"

"Listen," Haze said roughly, "I got business of my own. I seen all of you I want." He began walking very fast.

Enoch kept skipping steps to keep up. "I been here two months," he said, "and I don't know nobody. People ain't friendly here. I got me a room and there ain't never nobody in it but me. My daddy said I had to come. I wouldn't never have come but he made me. I think I seen you sommers before. You ain't from Stockwell, are you?"

"No."

"Melsy?"

"No."

"Sawmill set up there oncet," Enoch said. "Look like you had a kind of familer face."

They walked on without saying anything until they got on the main street again. It was almost deserted. "Goodby," Haze said and quickened his walk again.

"I'm going thisaway too," Enoch said in a sullen voice. On the left there was a movie house where the electric bill was being changed. "We hadn't got tied up with them hicks, we could have gone to a show," he muttered. He strode along at Haze's elbow, talking in a half mumble, half whine. Once he caught at his sleeve to slow him down and Haze jerked it away. "He made me come," he said in a cracked voice. Haze looked at him and saw he was crying, his face seamed and wet and a purple-pink color. "I ain't but eighteen year," he cried, "and he made me come and I don't know nobody, nobody here'll have nothing to do with nobody else. They ain't friendly. He done gone off with a woman and made me come but she ain't gonna stay for long, he's gonna beat hell

out of her before she gets herself stuck to a chair. You the first familer face I seen in two months, I seen you sommers before. I know I seen you sommers before."

Haze looked straight ahead with his face set hard, and Enoch kept up the half mumble, half blubber. They passed a church and a hotel and an antique shop and turned up a street full of brick houses, each alike in the darkness.

"If you want you a woman you don't have to be follerin nothing looked like her," Enoch said. "I heard about where there's a house full of two-dollar ones. Whyn't we go have us some fun? I could pay you back next week."

"Look," Haze said, "I'm going where I stay—two doors from here. I got a woman. I got a woman, you understand? I don't need to go with you."

"I could pay you back next week," Enoch said. "I work at the city zoo. I guard a gate and I get paid ever week."

"Get away from me," Haze said.

"People ain't friendly here. You ain't from here and you ain't friendly neither."

Haze didn't answer him. He went on with his neck drawn close to his shoulder blades as if he were cold.

"You don't know nobody neither," Enoch said. "You ain't got no woman or nothing to do. I knew when I first seen you you didn't have nobody or nothing. I seen you and I knew it."

"This is where I live," Haze said, and he turned up the walk of the house without looking back at Enoch.

Enoch stopped. "Yeah," he cried, "oh yeah," and he ran his sleeve under his nose to stop the snivel. "Yeah," he cried. "Go on where you goin but looker here." He slapped at his pocket and ran up and caught Haze's sleeve and rattled the peeler box at him. "She give me this. She give it to me and there ain't nothing you can do about it. She invited me to come to see them and not you and it was you follerin them." His eyes glinted through his tears and his face stretched in an evil crooked grin.

Haze's mouth jerked but he didn't say anything. He stood there for an instant, small in the middle of the steps, and then he raised his arm and hurled the stack of tracts he had been carrying. It hit Enoch in the chest and knocked his mouth open. He stood looking, with his mouth hanging open, at where it had hit his front, and then he turned and tore off down the street; and Haze went into the house.

The night before was the first time he had slept with Leora Watts or any woman, and he had not been very successful with her. When he finished, he was like something washed ashore on her, and she had made obscene comments about him, which he remembered gradually during the day. He was uneasy in the thought of going to her again. He didn't know what she would say when she opened the door and saw him there.

When she opened the door and saw him there, she said, "Ha ha." She was a big blonde woman with a green nightgown on. "What do YOU want?" she said.

He put his face into what he thought was an all-knowing expression but it was only stretched a little on one side. The black wool hat sat on his head squarely. Leora left the door open and went back to the bed. He came in with his hat on and when it knocked the sacked electric lightbulb, he took it off. Leora rested her face on her hand and watched him. He began to move around the room examining this and that. His throat got dryer and his heart began to grip him like a little ape clutching the bars of its cage. He sat down on the edge of her bed, with his hat in his hand.

Leora's eyes had narrowed some and her mouth had widened and got thin as a knife blade. "That Jesus-seeing hat!" she said. She sat up and pulled her nightgown from under her and took it off. She reached for his hat and put it on her head and sat with her hands on her hips, watching him. Haze stared blank-faced for a minute, then he made three quick noises that were laughs. He jumped for the electric light cord and undressed in the dark.

Once when he was small, his father took him and his sister, Ruby, to a carnival that stopped in Melsy. There was one tent that cost more money, a little off to the side. A dried-up man with a horn voice was barking it. He never said what was inside. He said it was so SINsational that it would cost any man wanted to see it thirty-five cents, and it was so EXclusive, only fifteen could get in at a time. His father sent him and Ruby to a tent where two monkeys danced, and then he made for it, moving shuttle-faced and close to the walls of things, like he moved. Haze left the monkeys and followed him, but he didn't have thirty-five cents. He asked the barker what was inside.

"Beat it," the man said, "there ain't no pop and there ain't no monkeys."

"I already seen them," he said.

"That's fine," the man said, "beat it."

"I got fifteen cents," he said. "Whyn't you lemme in and I could see half of it." It's something about a privy, he was thinking. It's some men in a privy. Then he thought, maybe it's a man and a woman in a privy. She wouldn't want me in there. "I got fifteen cents," he said.

"It's more than half over," the man said, fanning with his straw hat. "You run along."

"That'll be fifteen cents worth then," Haze said.

"Scram," the man said.

"Is it a nigger?" Haze asked. "Are they doing something to a nigger?"

The man leaned off his platform and his dried-up face drew into a glare. "Where'd you get that idear?" he said.

"I don't know," Haze said.

"How old are you?" the man asked.

"Twelve," Haze said. He was ten.

"Gimme that fifteen cents," the man said, "and get in there."

He slid the money on the platform and scrambled to get in before it was over. He went through the flap of the tent and inside there was another tent and he went through that. His face was hot through to

the back of his head. All he could see were the backs of the men. He climbed up on a bench and looked over their heads. They were looking down into a lowered place where something white was lying, squirming a little, in a box lined with black cloth. For a second he thought it was a skinned animal and then he saw it was a woman. She was fat and she had a face like an ordinary woman except there was a mole on the corner of her lip, that moved when she grinned, and one on her side, that was moving too. Haze's head became so heavy he couldn't turn it away from her.

"Had one of themther built in ever casket," his father, up toward the front, said, "be a heap ready to go sooner."

He recognized the voice without looking. He fell down off the bench and scrambled out the tent. He crawled out under the side of the outside one because he didn't want to pass the barker. He got in the back of a truck and sat down in the far corner of it. The carnival was making a tin roar outside.

His mother was standing by the washpot in the yard, looking at him, when he got home. She wore black all the time and her dresses were longer than other women's. She was standing there straight, looking at him. He slid behind a tree and got out of her view, but in a few minutes he could feel her watching him through the tree. He saw the lowered place and the casket again and a thin woman in the casket who was too long for it. Her head stuck up at one end and her knees were raised to make her fit. She had a cross-shaped face and hair pulled close to her head, and she was twisting and trying to cover herself while the men looked down. He stood flat against the tree, dry-throated. She left the washpot and come toward him with a stick. She said, "What you seen?"

"What you seen?" she said.

"What you seen?" she said, using the same tone of voice all the time. She hit him across the legs with the stick, but he was like part of the tree. "Jesus died to redeem you," she said.

"I never ast Him," he muttered.

She didn't hit him again but she stood looking at him, shut-mouthed, and he forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him. In a minute she threw the stick away from her and went back to the washpot, shut-mouthed.

The next day he took his shoes in secret out into the woods. He never wore them except for revivals and in winter. He took them out of the box and filled the bottoms of them with stones and small rocks and then he put them on. He laced them up tight and walked in them through the woods what he knew to be a mile, until he came to a creek, and then he sat down and took them off and eased his feet in the wet sand. He thought, that ought to satisfy Him. Nothing happened. If a stone had fallen he would have taken it for a sign. After a while he drew his feet out the sand and let them dry, and then he put the shoes on again with the rocks still in them and he walked a half mile back before he took them off.

# On Being a "Hillbilly Thomist"

(18 May 55, to Robie Macauley)

I certainly am glad you like the stories because now I feel it's not bad that I like them so much. The truth is I like them better than anybody and I read them over and over and laugh and laugh, then get embarrassed when I remember I was the one wrote them. Unlike *Wise Blood*, they were all relatively painless to me; but now I have to quit enjoying life and get on with the second novel. The first chapter of it is going to be published in the fall in the *New World Writing* thing and is to be called "You Can't Be Any Poorer Than Dead"—which is the way I feel every time I get to work on it.

Nobody has given me any gold even in a medal, but you are right about the television. I am going to New York on the 30th to be, if you please, interviewed by Mr. Harvey Breit (on the 31st) on a program he is starting up over NBC-TV [*Galley-Proof*]. They are also going to dramatize the opening scene from "The Life You Save" etc. Do you reckon this is going to corrupt me? I already feel like a combination of Msgr. Sheen and Gorgeous George [a wrestler]. Everybody who has read *Wise Blood* thinks I'm a hillbilly nihilist, whereas I would like to create the impression over the television that I'm a hillbilly Thomist, but I will probably not be able to think of anything to say to Mr. Harvey Breit but "Huh?"

and "Ah dunno." When I come back I'll probably have to spend three months day and night in the chicken pen to counteract these evil influences.

Although I am a prominent Georgia Author I have never went to Washington but I have went over it and shall this time at an altitude of 14,000 feet compliments Eastern Airlines.

Greensboro was moderately ghastly, the more so than it would have been if you and Anne had come down. The panel was the worst as I never can think of anything to say about a story and the conferences were high comedy. I had one with a bearded intellectual delinquent from Kenyon who wouldn't be convinced he hadn't written a story, and the rest with girls writing about life in the dormitory.

A couple of weeks ago Ashley came down of a Sunday afternoon with [a friend] and they took in the architecture and had supper with me. Ashley was telling me that you are an admirer of Dr. Frank Crane [a newspaper columnist], my favorite Protestant theologian (salvation by the compliment club). I was glad to hear this because I think the doctor ought to be more widely appreciated. He is really a combination minister and masseur, don't you think? He appears in the Atlanta *Constitution* on the same page as the funnies. I like to hear him tell Alma A. that she can keep her husband by losing 75 pounds and just the other day he told a girl who was terrified of toads how not to let this ruin her life—know the truth & the truth shall make you free. However, his best column was where he told about getting the letter from the convict who had joined the compliment club. I hope you saw that one.

Please thank Mr. W. P. Southard for liking my stories. I am always glad to know I have a reader of quality because I have so many who aren't. I get some letters from people I might have created myself . . . [like] one from a young man in California who was starting a magazine to be called *Hearse*—"a vehicle to convey stories and poems to the great cemetery of the American intellect." Then I got a message from two theological students at Alexandria who said they had read *Wise Blood* and that I was their pin-up girl—the grimmest distinction to date. I got

a real ugly letter from a Boston lady about that story called "A Temple of the Holy Ghost." She said she was a Catholic and so she couldn't understand how anybody could even HAVE such thoughts. I wrote her a letter that could have been signed by the bishop and now she is my fast friend and recently wrote me that her husband had run for attorney general but hadn't been elected. I wish somebody real intelligent would write me sometime but I seem to attract the lunatic fringe mainly.

I will be real glad when this television thing is over with. I keep having a mental picture of my glacial glare being sent out over the nation onto millions of children who are waiting impatiently for *The Batman* to come on.

Best to you and Anne and write me again before my next book comes out because that may be in 1984.

# On St. Thomas Aquinas

(9 August 55, to "A")

I have thought of Simone Weil in connection with you almost from the first and I got out this piece I enclose and reread it and the impression was not lessened. In the face of anyone's experience, someone like myself who has had almost no experience, must be humble. I will never have the experience of the convert, or of the one who fails to be converted, or even in all probability of the formidable sinner; but your effort not to be seduced by the Church moves me greatly. God permits it for some reason though it is the devil's greatest work of hallucination. Fr. [Jean] de Menasce told somebody not to come into the Church until he felt it would be an enlargement of his freedom. This is what you are doing and you are right, but do not make your feeling of the voluptuous seductive powers of the Church into a hard shell to protect yourself from her. I suppose it is like marriage, that when you get into it, you find it is the beginning, not the end, of the struggle to make love work.

I think most people come to the Church by means the Church does not allow, else there would be no need their getting to her at all. However, this is true inside as well, as the operation of the Church is entirely set up for the sinner; which creates much misunderstanding among the smug.

I suppose I read Aristotle in college but not to know I was doing it; the same with Plato. I don't have the kind of mind that can carry such beyond the actual reading, i.e., total non-retention has kept my education from being a burden to me. So I couldn't make any judgment on the *Summa*, except to say this: I read it for about twenty minutes every night before I go to bed. If my mother were to come in during this process and say, "Turn off that light. It's late," I with lifted finger and broad bland beatific expression, would reply, "On the contrary, I answer that the light, being eternal and limitless, cannot be turned off. Shut your eyes," or some such thing. In any case, I feel I can personally guarantee that St. Thomas loved God because for the life of me I cannot help loving St. Thomas. His brothers didn't want him to waste himself being a Dominican and so locked him up in a tower and introduced a prostitute into his apartment; her he ran out with a red-hot poker. It would be fashionable today to be in sympathy with the woman, but I am in sympathy with St. Thomas.

I don't know B.R. well, but he came out here one evening and had dessert with us. I have a friend who is very fond of him and so I hear a lot about him and his troubles, of which he seems to be so well supplied that it's a miracle he's still alive. My impression was that he was a very fine and a very proud man. When he was sick about a year ago, I sent him a copy of St. Bernard's letters and in thanking me, he said he was an agnostic. You are right that he's an anachronism, I guess, strangely cut-off anyway. I wrote to my friend who is so fond of him that perhaps he might be sent something to read that would at least set him thinking in a wider direction, but I am afraid this filled the poor girl with apprehension, she thinking I would probably produce Cardinal Newman or somebody. I had had in mind Gabriel Marcel whose Gifford Lectures I had just read. This girl is a staunch and excellent Presbyterian with a polite horror of anything Romish.

I am highly pleased you noticed the shirts, though it hadn't occurred to me that they suggested the lack of hairshirts. I am chiefly exercised by the hero rampant on the shirt and the always somewhat-less

occupying it. This is funny to me. The only embossed one I ever had had a fierce-looking bulldog on it with the word GEORGIA over him. I wore it all the time, it being my policy at that point in life to create an unfavorable impression. My urge for such has to be repressed, as my mother does not approve of making a spectacle of oneself when over thirty.

I have some long and tall thoughts on the subject of God's working through nature, but I will not inflict them on you now. I find I have a habit of announcing the obvious in pompous and dogmatic periods. I like to forget that I'm only a storyteller. Right now I am trying to write a lecture that I have been invited to deliver next spring in Lansing, Mich. to a wholesale gathering of the AAUW. I am trying to write this thing on the justification of distortion in fiction, call it something like "The Freak in Modern Fiction." Anyway, I have it borne in on me that my business is to write and not talk about it. I have ten months to write the lecture in and it is going to take every bit of it. I don't read much modern fiction. I have never read Nelson Algren that you mention. I feel lumpish.

ESSAY

# Novelist and Believer

Being a novelist and not a philosopher or theologian, I shall have to enter this discussion at a much lower level and proceed along a much narrower course than that held up to us here as desirable. It has been suggested that for the purposes of this symposium,[1] we conceive religion broadly as an expression of man's ultimate concern rather than identify it with institutional Judaism or Christianity or with "going to church."

I see the utility of this. It's an attempt to enlarge your ideas of what religion is and of how the religious need may be expressed in the art of our time; but there is always the danger that in trying to enlarge the ideas of students, we will evaporate them instead, and I think nothing in this world lends itself to quick vaporization so much as the religious concern.

As a novelist, the major part of my task is to make everything, even an ultimate concern, as solid, as concrete, as specific as possible. The novelist begins his work where human knowledge begins—with the senses; he works through the limitations of matter, and unless he is writing fantasy, he has to stay within the concrete possibilities of his culture. He is bound by his particular past and by those institutions and traditions that this past has left to his society. The Judaeo-Christian

1. At Sweetbriar College, Virginia, in March, 1963.

tradition has formed us in the west; we are bound to it by ties which may often be invisible, but which are there nevertheless. It has formed the shape of our secularism; it has formed even the shape of modern atheism. For my part, I shall have to remain well within the Judaeo-Christian tradition. I shall have to speak, without apology, of the Church, even when the Church is absent; of Christ, even when Christ is not recognized.

If one spoke as a scientist, I believe it would be possible to disregard large parts of the personality and speak simply as a scientist, but when one speaks as a novelist, he must speak as he writes—with the whole personality. Many contend that the job of the novelist is to show us how man feels, and they say that this is an operation in which his own commitments intrude not at all. The novelist, we are told, is looking for a symbol to express feeling, and whether he be Jew or Christian or Buddhist or whatever makes no difference to the aptness of the symbol. Pain is pain, joy is joy, love is love, and these human emotions are stronger than any mere religious belief; they are what they are and the novelist shows them as they are. This is all well and good so far as it goes, but it just does not go as far as the novel goes. Great fiction involves the whole range of human judgment; it is not simply an imitation of feeling. The good novelist not only finds a symbol for feeling, he finds a symbol and a way of lodging it which tells the intelligent reader whether this feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral, whether it is good or evil. And his theology, even in its most remote reaches, will have a direct bearing on this.

It makes a great difference to the look of a novel whether its author believes that the world came late into being and continues to come by a creative act of God, or whether he believes that the world and ourselves are the product of a cosmic accident. It makes a great difference to his novel whether he believes that we are created in God's image, or whether he believes we create God in our own. It makes a great difference whether he believes that our wills are free, or bound like those of the other animals.

St. Augustine wrote that the things of the world pour forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically into the world of things. To the person who believes this—as the western world did up until a few centuries ago—this physical, sensible world is good because it proceeds from a divine source. The artist usually knows this by instinct; his senses, which are used to penetrating the concrete, tell him so. When Conrad said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe, he was speaking with the novelist's surest instinct. The artist penetrates the concrete world in order to find at its depths the image of its source, the image of ultimate reality. This in no way hinders his perception of evil but rather sharpens it, for only when the natural world is seen as good does evil become intelligible as a destructive force and a necessary result of our freedom.

For the last few centuries we have lived in a world which has been increasingly convinced that the reaches of reality end very close to the surface, that there is no ultimate divine source, that the things of the world do not pour forth from God in a double way, or at all. For nearly two centuries the popular spirit of each succeeding generation has tended more and more to the view that the mysteries of life will eventually fall before the mind of man. Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind. In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected.

Nevertheless, the novelist always has to create a world and a believable one. The virtues of art, like the virtues of faith, are such that they reach beyond the limitations of the intellect, beyond any mere theory that a writer may entertain. If the novelist is doing what as an artist he is bound to do, he will inevitably suggest that image of ultimate reality as it can be glimpsed in some aspect of the human situation. In this

sense, art reveals, and the theologian has learned that he can't ignore it. In many universities, you will find departments of theology vigorously courting departments of English. The theologian is interested specifically in the modern novel because there he sees reflected the man of our time, the unbeliever, who is nevertheless grappling in a desperate and usually honest way with intense problems of the spirit.

We live in an unbelieving age but one which is markedly and lopsidedly spiritual. There is one type of modern man who recognizes spirit in himself but who fails to recognize a being outside himself whom he can adore as Creator and Lord; consequently he has become his own ultimate concern. He says with Swinburne, "Glory to man in the highest, for he is the master of things," or with Steinbeck, "In the end was the word and the word was with men." For him, man has his own natural spirit of courage and dignity and pride and must consider it a point of honor to be satisfied with this.

There is another type of modern man who recognizes a divine being not himself, but who does not believe that this being can be known anagogically or defined dogmatically or received sacramentally. Spirit and matter are separated for him. Man wanders about, caught in a maze of guilt he can't identify, trying to reach a God he can't approach, a God powerless to approach him.

And there is another type of modern man who can neither believe nor contain himself in unbelief and who searches desperately, feeling about in all experience for the lost God.

At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily. The fiction which celebrates this last state will be the least likely to transcend its limitations, for when the religious need is banished successfully, it usually atrophies, even in the novelist. The sense of mystery vanishes. A kind of reverse evolution takes place, and the whole range of feeling is dulled.

The searchers are another matter. Pascal wrote in his notebook, "If I had not known you, I would not have found you." These unbelieving

searchers have their effect even upon those of us who do believe. We begin to examine our own religious notions, to sound them for genuineness, to purify them in the heat of our unbelieving neighbor's anguish. What Christian novelist could compare his concern to Camus'? We have to look in much of the fiction of our time for a kind of sub-religion which expresses its ultimate concern in images that have not yet broken through to show any recognition of a God who has revealed himself. As great as much of this fiction is, as much as it reveals a wholehearted effort to find the only true ultimate concern, as much as in many cases it represents religious values of a high order, I do not believe that it can adequately represent in fiction the central religious experience. That, after all, concerns a relationship with a supreme being recognized through faith. It is the experience of an encounter, of a kind of knowledge which affects the believer's every action. It is Pascal's experience after his conversion and not before.

What I say here would be much more in line with the spirit of our times if I could speak to you about the experience of such novelists as Hemingway and Kafka and Gide and Camus, but all my own experience has been that of the writer who believes, again in Pascal's words, in the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and not of the philosophers and scholars." This is an unlimited God and one who has revealed himself specifically. It is one who became man and rose from the dead. It is one who confounds the senses and the sensibilities, one known early on as a stumbling block. There is no way to gloss over this specification or to make it more acceptable to modern thought. This God is the object of ultimate concern and he has a name.

The problem of the novelist who wishes to write about a man's encounter with this God is how he shall make the experience—which is both natural and supernatural—understandable, and credible, to his reader. In any age this would be a problem, but in our own, it is a wellnigh insurmountable one. Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental. When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the

Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken, and the spirit of that step has continued apace. When the physical fact is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable.

The novelist doesn't write to express himself, he doesn't write simply to render a vision he believes true, rather he renders his vision so that it can be transferred, as nearly whole as possible, to his reader. You can safely ignore the reader's taste, but you can't ignore his nature, you can't ignore his limited patience. Your problem is going to be difficult in direct proportion as your beliefs depart from his.

When I write a novel in which the central action is a baptism, I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance. To this end I have to bend the whole novel—its language, its structure, its action. I have to make the reader feel, in his bones if nowhere else, that something is going on here that counts. Distortion in this case is an instrument; exaggeration has a purpose, and the whole structure of the story or novel has been made what it is because of belief. This is not the kind of distortion that destroys; it is the kind that reveals, or should reveal.

Students often have the idea that the process at work here is one which hinders honesty. They think that inevitably the writer, instead of seeing what is, will see only what he believes. It is perfectly possible, of course, that this will happen. Ever since there have been such things as novels, the world has been flooded with bad fiction for which the religious impulse has been responsible. The sorry religious novel comes about when the writer supposes that because of his belief, he is somehow dispensed from the obligation to penetrate concrete reality. He will think that the eyes of the Church or of the Bible or of his particular theology have already done the seeing for him, and that his business is to rearrange this essential vision into satisfying patterns, getting

himself as little dirty in the process as possible. His feeling about this may have been made more definite by one of those Manichean-type theologies which sees the natural world as unworthy of penetration. But the real novelist, the one with an instinct for what he is about, knows that he cannot approach the infinite directly, that he must penetrate the natural human world as it is. The more sacramental his theology, the more encouragement he will get from it to do just that.

The supernatural is an embarrassment today even to many of the churches. The naturalistic bias has so well saturated our society that the reader doesn't realize that he has to shift his sights to read fiction which treats of an encounter with God. Let me leave the novelist and talk for a moment about his reader.

This reader has first to get rid of a purely sociological point of view. In the thirties we passed through a period in American letters when social criticism and social realism were considered by many to be the most important aspects of fiction. We still suffer with a hangover from that period. I launched a character, Hazel Motes, whose presiding passion was to rid himself of a conviction that Jesus had redeemed him. Southern degeneracy never entered my head, but Hazel said "I seen" and "I taken" and he was from East Tennessee, and so the general reader's explanation for him was that he must represent some social problem peculiar to that part of the benighted South.

Ten years, however, have made some difference in our attitude toward fiction. The sociological tendency has abated in that particular form and survived in another just as bad. This is the notion that the fiction writer is after the typical. I don't know how many letters I have received telling me that the South is not at all the way I depict it; some tell me that Protestantism in the South is not at all the way I portray it, that a Southern Protestant would never be concerned, as Hazel Motes is, with penitential practices. Of course, as a novelist I've never wanted to characterize the typical South or typical Protestantism. The South and the religion found there are extremely fluid and offer enough variety to give the novelist the widest range of possibilities imaginable, for the

novelist is bound by the reasonable possibilities, not the probabilities, of his culture.

There is an even worse bias than these two, and that is the clinical bias, the prejudice that sees everything strange as a case study in the abnormal. Freud brought to light many truths, but his psychology is not an adequate instrument for understanding the religious encounter or the fiction that describes it. Any psychological or cultural or economic determination may be useful up to a point; indeed, such facts can't be ignored, but the novelist will be interested in them only as he is able to go through them to give us a sense of something beyond them. The more we learn about ourselves, the deeper into the unknown we push the frontiers of fiction.

I have observed that most of the best religious fiction of our time is most shocking precisely to those readers who claim to have an intense interest in finding more "spiritual purpose"—as they like to put it—in modern novels than they can at present detect in them. Today's reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift. This reader's favorite word is compassion. I don't wish to defame the word. There is a better sense in which it can be used but seldom is—the sense of being in travail with and for creation in its subjection to vanity. This is a sense which implies a recognition of sin; this is a suffering-with, but one which blunts no edges and makes no excuses. When infused into novels, it is often forbidding. Our age doesn't go for it.

I have said a great deal about the religious sense that the modern audience lacks, and by way of objection to this, you may point out to me that there is a real return of intellectuals in our time to an interest in and a respect for religion. I believe that this is true. What this interest in religion will result in for the future remains to be seen. It may, together with the new spirit of ecumenism that we see everywhere around us, herald a new religious age, or it may simply be that religion will suffer the ultimate degradation and become, for a little time, fashionable. Whatever it means for the future, I don't believe that our present society

is one whose basic beliefs are religious, except in the South. In any case, you can't have effective allegory in times when people are swept this way and that by momentary convictions, because everyone will read it differently. You can't indicate moral values when morality changes with what is being done, because there is no accepted basis of judgment. And you cannot show the operation of grace when grace is cut off from nature or when the very possibility of grace is denied, because no one will have the least idea of what you are about.

The serious writer has always taken the flaw in human nature for his starting point, usually the flaw in an otherwise admirable character. Drama usually bases itself on the bedrock of original sin, whether the writer thinks in theological terms or not. Then, too, any character in a serious novel is supposed to carry a burden of meaning larger than himself. The novelist doesn't write about people in a vacuum; he writes about people in a world where something is obviously lacking, where there is the general mystery of incompleteness and the particular tragedy of our own times to be demonstrated, and the novelist tries to give you, within the form of the book, a total experience of human nature at any time. For this reason the greatest dramas naturally involve the salvation or loss of the soul. Where there is no belief in the soul, there is very little drama. The Christian novelist is distinguished from his pagan colleagues by recognizing sin as sin. According to his heritage he sees it not as sickness or an accident of environment, but as a responsible choice of offense against God which involves his eternal future. Either one is serious about salvation or one is not. And it is well to realize that the maximum amount of seriousness admits the maximum amount of comedy. Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe. One reason a great deal of our contemporary fiction is humorless is because so many of these writers are relativists and have to be continually justifying the actions of their characters on a sliding scale of values.

Our salvation is a drama played out with the devil, a devil who is not simply generalized evil, but an evil intelligence determined on its

own supremacy. I think that if writers with a religious view of the world excel these days in the depiction of evil, it is because they have to make its nature unmistakable to their particular audience.

The novelist and the believer, when they are not the same man, yet have many traits in common—a distrust of the abstract, a respect for boundaries, a desire to penetrate the surface of reality and to find in each thing the spirit which makes it itself and holds the world together. But I don't believe that we shall have great religious fiction until we have again that happy combination of believing artist and believing society. Until that time, the novelist will have to do the best he can in travail with the world he has. He may find in the end that instead of reflecting the image at the heart of things, he has only reflected our broken condition and, through it, the face of the devil we are possessed by. This is a modest achievement, but perhaps a necessary one.