Begin "the beginning of something she couldn't begin": Writing as Repetition in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

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One of the basic effects Flannery O'Connor's fiction has upon its readers is its shockingness. The author repeatedly forces her readers to be witnesses to the horrifying experiences the characters go through. In one of the stories the protagonist is shot three times through the chest by a serial killer, and in another gored to death by a bull. And even when no character is killed, there is always prepared some critical event that violently uncovers the bestiality and self-righteousness of human being. The narrator reveals how man is innately grotesque by tenaciously likening the characters to animals and inanimate objects, and impassively reports what price they have to pay in the end. The characters die without the slightest dignity. Their bodies are relentlessly deformed, tormented and annihilated. Simply aghast at the extremity of violence, one usually fails to elicit any morally useful meaning from the text, and is left with the unspeakable impact of the events themselves.

O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* (1952) is no exception in bearing such horror and violence. Everywhere in the novel are inscribed the horrifyingly distorted images of human body. The bodies of the characters assimilate animals and inanimate things, and things in turn develop aggression towards them, transgressing the fragile border between the two; Enoch Emery looks "like a friendly hound dog with light mange" (*Collected Works*, henceforth *CW*, 23); Sabbath Hawks moves her head "as if it worked on a screw" (*CW* 58); Asa Hawks has "the expression of a grinning mandrill" (*CW* 20); Hazel Motes' face pressed against the car window looks "like a paper face pasted there" (*CW* 58); the landlady Mrs. Flood resembles "the mop she carried upside-down" (*CW* 60). Haze cannot get his disobedient car working, and Enoch's umbrella slips under his arm "as if it meant to keep from going anywhere" (*CW* 97). While the characters recede to the state of bestiality and machine-like inanimateness, corpses, wounded bodies, and smashed, fragmented body parts fill the pages: the dead maternal body keeps springing up from her coffin; a mummy is

thrown against a wall and broke into pieces. The protagonist himself discloses peculiar aggression toward himself and others; in one time he inflicts himself with stones and barbed wire, and in the other runs over twice to death the false prophet who imitates his preaching. And near the end of the novel, he suddenly blinds himself, wanders away from his apartment and is finally beaten to death by a cop (*CW* 119). This sudden and putatively gratuitous ending strikes readers as apparently incomprehensible, and makes O'Connor's peculiar first novel all the more enigmatic. Just like Mrs. Flood, the landlady who stares at the eyes of the dead protagonist, readers feel paralyzed as if they "got to the beginning of something" they couldn't begin (CW 131).

Confirming the "redemption-centered" viewpoint the author professed in the "Author's Note to the Second Edition" and elsewhere, critics have often read the novel as a kind of conversion narrative at the end of which the protagonist becomes aware of the religious compulsion he has disavowed so long, and finally recognizes that he has been redeemed by Christ.[1] According to this view, Hazel Motes' act of self-blinding assuredly indicates that by plucking out his eyes, he paradoxically comes to see something that cannot be seen with ordinary vision; he is no longer "where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way"(*CW* 59). While such reading emphasizes a change or spiritual evolution the protagonist goes through, I have been haunted by somewhat unchanging aspect of the novel. In other words, the repetition of the horror itself. Why does O'Connor persistently let her readers face the overwhelming physical pain imposed on the characters? Why does she depict the figure of Christ with inexorable horror, as "a wild ragged figure" who motions the protagonist "to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown"(*CW* 11)? Although she persistently proclaims the hidden significance of violence in her fiction,[2] it seems to me that the violence and the terror in her fiction often do not reach any meaning other than itself; the repetition of them seems inscrutable and uncontrollable, uncontrollable even to the author herself. Rather than reducing the horrific elements in O'Connor's fiction to the means and meanings already affirmed by the author, I would like to remain "where the blind don't see," and reconsider such repetition as the undercurrent dynamics of O'Connor's first novel.

1

In *Wise Blood*, the protagonist Hazel Motes' manners of behavior as a whole display an indissoluble ambivalence. His first action described in the opening of the novel already discloses its ambivalent nature: "Hazel Motes sat as a forward angle on the green plush train seat, looking at the window as if he might want to jump out of it, and the next down the aisle at the other end of it" (*CW* 3). In this passage Haze looks at the two different objects almost at the same time, and in a few pages readers are told what lies beyond his nervous glance: he is looking at a porter. As soon as the narrator reveals the object that the protagonist fervently looks into, his ambivalent action partakes of a temporal direction. Haze associates the porter with his past memory, and almost deliberately takes him for a black whom he knew in his hometown. His gaze is split not only between two points separately arranged in space, but between the passing present (the changing landscape outside the window) and the recurrent past (the porter). As the narrator precisely reports, the protagonist appears to try "to move forward and backward at the same time" (*CW* 23). Such convulsive motion of the protagonist exemplifies two undercurrent motives around which the narrative structure of Wise Blood is formed and fabricated: That is, departure and homecoming.

What is distinctive in the narrative of the novel is its unexpectedness. As if they were acting "like a bird finds itself building a nest when it hasn't actually been planning to," the characters all of a sudden set out for new things and move from one situation to another (*CW* 73).[3] In many cases they just wake up in the morning and decides what they would do next: Hazel Motes wakes from his sleep and suddenly makes up his mind to buy a car or to move to another city; Enoch Emery becomes sure something would happen to his life and realizes that he should steal the mummy from the museum to bring it to Haze. Behind their actions lies a sense of departure, an unfounded conviction that they are totally cut off from the past and therefore can change themselves completely and start a new life by doing something totally different from their previous experience. In the first chapter of the novel, Haze is on a train journey from home to an unknown city. Asked by his fellow passenger Mrs. Hitchcock if he is going home, he denies and says with confidence, "I'm going to do some things I never have done before" in the city (*CW* 5). This desire for departure, which drives him forth all through the novel and plunges him into one

seemingly incomprehensible action to another, is one of the motivating forces for the plot development of the novel.

While the haphazard action of the protagonist is a major plop of the story, it is often interrupted and discontinued by the power of the past memory that recurrently comes back to him. On the train bound for Taulkinham, Haze recalls in the dream he has in the berth the burial of his mother. In the mind of the son who is half awake and half asleep, the dead mother is never rested peacefully and comes back in an appalling image:

> He had seen her face through the crack when they were shutting the top on her. [...] He had seen the shadow that came down over her face and pulled her mouth down as if she wasn't any more satisfied dead than alive, as if she were going to spring up and shove the lid back and fly out and satisfy herself: but they shut it. She might have been going to fly out of there, she might have been going to spring. He saw her in his sleep, terrible, like a huge bat, dart from the closing, fly out of there, but it was falling dark on top of her, closing down all the time. From inside he saw it closing, coming closer closer down and cutting off the light and the room. He opened his eyes and saw it closing and he sprang up between the crack and wedged his head and shoulders through it and hung there, dizzy, with the dim light of the train slowly showing the rug below. (CW 14)

Haze's mother returns to the son's imagination like an abominable living dead in ghost stories. The ghoulish image of the mother transformed into "a huge bat" here simply epitomizes the horror of the past violently breaking into the present. In the final part of this passage, Haze thinks that it is himself who is boxed inside the coffin, hung between the crack and laying for a chance to fly out. Confusing his dreadful fantasy with reality, he desperately tries to get out from the berth. This terrifying power of the past recurrently haunts the protagonist and evokes in him the fear of homecoming.

One significant scene in the third chapter in which Haze recalls the time he went to a carnival with his father presents the origin of his fear. Though he thinks his mother "wouldn't want me in there," Haze sneaks into a show tent following his father and sees something like "a skinned animal" in a coffin that proves to be a naked woman (*CW* 34). Hearing the father shout obscene words to the woman, he scrambles out the tent and goes home where his mother is

waiting, looking at him:

> She was standing there straight, looking at him. He moved 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. He stood flat against the tree, waiting. She left the washpot and came 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. (*CW*, 35-6)

In this scene the mother is depicted as a relentless observer who never loses sight of the son. She interdicts and punishes him, not only by her stick, but also by her reproachfully piercing eyes. To the mother's reproach, "Jesus died to redeem you," the son disdainfully replies, "I never ast him" (*CW*, 36). Yet the thought that he betrayed his mother fixed itself in his mind as "the nameless unplaced guilt" and forces him to punish himself by walking in shoes with stones and rocks stuffed in them. He seeks the sign of forgiveness by the fierce self-infliction, yet in vain. The guilt for betrayal is preserved in his mind and later comes back as the petrifying gaze reenacted in the eyes of the other female characters. These women seduce Haze and at the same time evoke his guilt by eyeing him; Mrs. Watts with her "bold steady penetrating stare" (*CW* 17), Sabbath by repeatedly saying, "I seen you," and the woman with two little boys by looking at him time and again without speaking a word. In greater or lesser degrees the female characters continuously remind Haze of his mother and of the fact that he is still haunted by the guilt, not to mention the over-explicit statements by one of them.[4]

While the protagonist's memory of his mother is repeatedly described in the novel, his father appears only twice, and too shadowily. What should be noted concerning the aforementioned scene of punishment is the complete absence of the father. Instead of seeking help from his father who is absorbed in obscene attraction, Haze put on his shoes stuffed with rocks and stones and walks through the woods. His act of self-punishment seems to repeat the desperate

question of Christ as a deserted child: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" If one connects Haze's apparently unfathomable act of self-infliction with this question, it becomes clear that behind a series of apparently haphazard actions of the protagonist, his yearning for departure, lies the novel's hidden plot, that is, the quest of looking for the absent father. Concerning this problem, it is significant to reread the Enoch Emery episodes in the novel, since Haze's act of looking for the absent father is in fact the repetition of what Enoch does.[5]

Enoch is urged by the irresistible power of the "wise blood" running inside him, which he thinks he has inherited from his father. Each of his behavior, which is unpredictable even to himself, is intended "to justify his daddy's blood" (*CW* 73). As is clear when he tells Haze how he got rid of the "welfare woman" and found his way back to his father, Enoch seems to try to reconstruct the bond with his father by imitating his masculine behavior. Suffering from loneliness and alienation of city life, continuously frightened by aggressive strangers ready to do harm to him, Enoch develops in his fantasy an alternative paternal figure as the ideal of his ego. He wishes to start his life again by the communion with a compassionate person. The scene in which he shakes hands with Gonga, the great heroic gorilla, comically epitomizes his sterile effort. When he grasps the hand held out automatically before him, he unexpectedly feels the old familiar warmth: "It was the first hand that had been extended to Enoch since he had come to the city. It was warm and soft." As if he were trying to cling to the reminder of the lost emotional tie, he foolishly starts introducing himself, not knowing there is a man under the hairy skin. His hope is shuttered when his hand is jerked away with the surly remark, "You go to hell" (*CW*, 102). Wounded as he is, Enoch reenacts this missed encounter with the paternal figure by stealing the gorilla suit. He strips the pseudo-father of the costume and, as it were, makes his own body a place of encounter with the father.[6] His secret ambition has been to identify with his ideal figure, "THE young man of the future." He wants "some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand" (*CW* 108). His wish is granted through this sudden transformation. By putting on the hairy suit that is his new ideal skin and getting inside the warm body of father, he tries, as it were, to sublimate the mean blood of paternity.

Haze likewise looks for the paternal figure that might emancipate him from the traumatic repetition of the past. The qualification required for this father is neither the Old Testament-like relentlessness nor compulsiveness already displayed by the maternal. To be more precise, Haze needs a father without

intolerably grim stare. Hereupon Asa Hawks, the blind preacher and the father of Sabbath, emerges as a possible paternal figure. From the earliest phase of their relationship, Haze's interest in this man is contingent upon his blindness rather than his sermon. Or rather, the orthodoxy of his sermon is contingent upon his blindness. In contrast to his daughter who tells him repeatedly, "I seen you," the blind says to him, "I can smell the sin on your breath" (*CW* 27). His secret purpose is to see "*behind* the black glasses" of the preacher, which is to make sure of the lack of vision under his scarred eyelids (*CW* 82, italics original). In the presumably blind eyes of the preacher, Haze finds an ideal paternity that is completely differentiated from that of his mean original father, or of the God-like mother. Yet when Haze sneaks into Hawks' room, he finds out the preacher actually can see. Now that Hawks unveils his original meanness, Haze cannot make his escape. The scene in which he sees the mummy hold by Sabbath through the mirror and smash it against the wall reveals the inescapability from the grip of the past represented by the horrific gaze; what he kills is the distorted image of himself haunted by the mother. He repeats this murder of mirror image by ramming the car of Hoover Shoats into the ditch and running over to death this false prophet, yet what he has done exactly comes back upon himself when a patrolman pushes Essex over a cliff. After he loses his car, which is his vehicle for departure from the past, he goes back home and blinds himself. Does his final self-blinding, then, bespeak his resignation to accept the horrible fate of homecoming? Yet it seems that his self-blinding is at the same time a painful struggle of a deserted child to replace the absent father with himself and reenact the missed encounter with the ideal paternal figure.

These poignant actions by the deserted children, however, seem to be doomed to failure. The narrator prepares the ironical ending for both Enoch and Haze: Enoch's transformation can be read as the degradation to the mere bestiality; Haze cannot find his way out by self-blinding and reaches to the surly recognition that he is "not clean." As in other stories, O'Connor's harsh narrative voice punishes the characters for their spiritual ignorance, their secularity, and their misconception of free will. However, while the narrator torments the characters with parental severity in order to keep the plot in its intended form, it simultaneously shows a curious sympathy toward the character's miserable state as the deserted. One of the examples of this contradiction can be found in the description of two fearful stories of forsaken children told by Sabbath. These two stories apparently have a similar outline—

an unloved child who is repeatedly sent away comes back to haunt the family:

> "[T]his 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 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."(*CW* 28)

> "There was this child once," she said, turning over on her stomach, "that nobody cared if it lived or died. Its kin sent it around from one to another of them and finally to its grandmother who was a very evil woman and she couldn't stand to have it around because the least good thing made her break out in these welps. She would get all itching and swoll. Even her eyes would itch her and swell up and there wasn't nothing she could do but run up and down the road, shaking her hands and cursing and it was twicet as bad when this child was there so she kept the child locked up in a chicken crate. It seen its granny in hell-fire, swoll and burning, and it told her everything it seen and she got so swoll until finally she went to the well and wrapped the well rope around her neck and let down the bucket and broke her neck. (*CW* 69)

In these two poignant stories, children are deserted by their parents and confined in narrow space with nobody to take care of them. That O'Connor employs the pronoun "it" to refer to both children makes these passages all the more haunting. One may assume that using this pronoun is natural in the case of babies and little children, yet O'Connor here deliberately calls them "it" in order to deprive them of humanness. Given neither name nor sex, these children are just easily abandoned as if they do not have the slightest importance to their family. Such narrative strategy resembles the one which Joanne Halleran McMullen precisely points out in her examination on *The Violent Bear It Away*: "the child has become linguistically annihilated by the pronoun O'Connor uses to refer to him. ...O'Connor's language concentrates on

obliterating the personal worth of her fictional creations and then persecutes these beings made invisible with intense animosity" (McMullen 15). As McMullen argues, O'Connor's violent narrative voice seems not to care about "the personal worth" of the children reduced to "it."[7] It should be noted, however, that the children referred to as "it" in turn reveal a peculiar aggression and seek vengeance: in the first stories cited above, the dead baby, albeit confined in the chimney, keeps giving the grim stare toward its murderer. And in the second, the child locked up in the chicken crate finally drives the grandmother to death. While they are forced to remain in a helpless state, they revenge by "shining through the brick in the middle of the night" or seeing "its granny in hell-fire, swoll and burning." O'Connor mercilessly kills the children by her inexhaustible violent imagination; no female writer of her contemporaries can manage such relentless linguistic prolicide without sentiment, almost with insistence. And yet, she at the same time inscribes on the surface of the text the children's action of coming back to retaliate. Claire Katz explains these two conflicting aspects of O'Connor's narrative: "narrator and protagonist are two aspects of one dynamic: the author's psyche, split into the punishing parent and the rebellious child. Thus most of her protagonists, even when they are adults, seem fixed as children, acting out a drama of infantile conflict in a context strangely isolated from social realities. ... [I]t is because the narrator functions as punishing parent that she can distance herself from the protagonist and express the fantasies and forbidden impulses of the rebellious child, punishing him simultaneously by both the resolution of plot and her acidic wit"(Katz 58). As Katz claims, there is something childish in O'Connor's narrative voice which deforms and ruins the characters. The overwhelming aggression the narrator burns off is itself parallel with the rebellious attitude of the characters assaulted by it.[8] This incongruity and curious split in the narrative voice is what constructs the novel's tension between the desire for departure and the inescapability of homecoming.

2

As I have argued so far, the narrative development of *Wise Blood* is inextricably linked with the author's conflicting attitude toward the characters. Such attitude seems to be rather problematic when one considers that O'Connor is a female writer, since the story of looking for the absent father she embedded in the novel is marked by the negative representation of femininity.

What the protagonist is struggling to escape from is the monstrousness of the maternal body which repeatedly shows him the horrifying possibility of homecoming. In the opening of the novel Mrs. Hitchcock says "I guess you're going home," while in the ending Mrs. Floods closes Haze's futile journey by saying "I see you've come home"(*CW* 3, 131). And in between these remarks are the seductive female characters with the dreadful grinning and penetrating eyes pasted on their faces. Is these children's poignant struggle to reconstruct the father-son relationship, then, a kind of abjection, an attempt to separate from the abominable oneness with the maternal?[9] And if so, why did O'Connor, though she was a female writer, fill in the pages with these repugnantly grotesque images of female body?[10] A 1956 letter to "A" would be helpful in understanding this problem:

> What you say about there being two [sexes] now brings it home to me. I've always believed that there were two but generally acted as if there were only one. I guess meditation and contemplation and all the ways of prayer boil down to keeping it firmly in sight that there are two. I've never spent much time over the bride-bridegroom analogy. For me, perhaps because it began for me in the beginning, it's been more father and child. The things you have said about my being surprised to be over twelve, etc., have struck me as being quite comically accurate. When I was twelve I made up my mind absolutely that I would not get any older. I don't remember how I meant to stop it. There was something about "teen" attached to anything that was repulsive to me. I certainly didn't approve of what I saw of people of that age. I was a very ancient twelve; my views at that age would have done credit to a Civil War veteran. (*HB* 136)

As Patricia Smith Yaeger precisely points out, this letter reveals O'Connor's "curious refusal to allow herself to be gendered" (Yaeger 95). Taking into account her religious background as a devout Catholic, it seems at least logical that O'Connor had presumed that the primary human relationship is that of father and child. One can easily assume that this Christian notion of parent-child relationship, conjoined with the repugnance toward the gendered state represented as being "teen," precipitated the author into the negative representation of the feminine as the horrible obstruction in the protagonist's quest of looking for the paternal figure. Her narrative voice disguising a pregendered child fiercely blames the female characters for their banality and

their excessive lewdness. It deforms and contorts their bodies in order to disclose their immanent grotesqueness. Yet the overbearing appearance of these linguistically tormented female bodies in the text rather testifies the impossibility of abjection and repudiation. Just as Hazel Motes yearns for departure from the past but is paradoxically haunted by the horror of homecoming, the author seems to be inexorably possessed by the horrifying potential of the feminine that is within her and cannot entirely be debarred.

This is borne out by the fact that the maternal itself is not at all excluded from the religious context of the novel; Haze's mother punishes the son with the same severity of her father who was a circuit preacher. Her intrusive eyes partakes of the omnipotent power of the Old Testament God who inexorably imposes the guilt on the "degraded." Yet the figure of the mother is also likened to that of Christ through repetitive superimposition of images. In the aforementioned scene of punishment, for example, Haze's mother darts in and out of the son's vision, "watching him through the tree," which at once evokes the figure of Christ moving "from tree to tree in the back of [Haze's] mind" (*CW* 35, 11). Moreover, her action of springing up from the coffin confuses and dismantles the novel's set of severe dichotomies such as between departure and homecoming, between the holy and the secular, between adult and child, and between masculine and feminine. Those abandoned children resemble her in their struggle to break out from where they are locked up by the adults, and even Haze himself often shows similar motion. In their repetitive attempt to spring up, these characters are combined together, merged and united into an image of the mummy as the "new jesus" flying out of the glass case into Sabbath's arms: "She had never known anyone who looked like him before, but there was something in him of everyone she had ever known, as if they had all been rolled into one person and killed and shrunk and dried" (*CW* 104). Can a mother who, even after her death, continuously horrifies her son with her God-like piercing eyes be at the same time a hopeless deserted child? While such ambivalence and confusion in formulating religious symbols reveal the difficulty O'Connor had in reconciling her religious intention with appropriate images, it can be said that the true radicalness of the novel lies in this paradoxical coalescence of Christ with the deteriorated female body. Rather than reducing her vision into traditional, secure, harmless and uplifting one, she may have chosen to act out her dilemma in writing down the haunting yet wholly new image of Christ as a corpse dismembered and sprinkled all over the text.

This would become clearer by comparing the description of the female

characters in *Wise Blood* with that in the story called "The Train" (1948), which was later revised as the first chapter of the published novel. As is the case with the novel, the story dramatizes the train journey of the protagonist who has lost his home and his mother. Yet the representation of female characters in the short story has quite a different tone. While Hazel Motes in the novel remains indifferent to his garrulous company, the protagonist in the story feels "glad to have someone there talking" when Mrs. Hosen (future Mrs. Hitchcock) sits opposite to him, and even voluntarily introduces himself (*CW* 754). Her favorable impression on him is derived from her talkative nature, which was also the attribute of his mother:

> He remembered when he was a little boy, him and his mother and the other children would go into Chattanooga on the Tennessee Railroad. His mother had always started up a conversation with the other people on the train. She was like an old bird dog just unpenned that raced, sniffing up every rock and stick and sucking in the air around everything she stopped at. There wasn't a one person she hadn't spoken to by the time they were ready to get off. She remembered them too. Long years after, she would say she wondered where the lady who was going to Fort West, or she wondered if the man who was selling Bibles had ever got his wife out the hospital. She had a hankering for people—as if what happened to the ones she talked to happened to her then. She was a Jackson. Annie Lou Jackson. (*CW* 754)

Here Haze's mother is described without irony, and sentimentally, as a woman of a cheerful disposition and with considerable compassion for others. Elsewhere he remembers his mother in a nostalgic mood: "He seen his ma coming up the path, wiping her hands on an apron she had taken off, looking like the night change was on her, and then standing in the doorway: Haaazzzzeeeee, Haazzzeee, come in here"(CW 755). She is totally different from the mother in the novel who silently moves from tree to tree, waiting for the son in order to punish him. Yet the image of the mother in the story is rather unsettling on the whole. When the protagonist is tired of Mrs. Hosen's chattering, he modifies his memory of the mother—"Haze's mother had never talked much on the train; she mostly listened. She was a Jackson" (CW 757). In the published novel O'Connor deleted all these ambiguous descriptions quoted above in order to avoid confusion, and what has remained ultimately is the

horrifying image of a woman flying out of a closing coffin "like a huge bat" (CW 14, 761). The mother is at last envenomed and transfigured into the living dead, and, in keeping with this, Hazel Motes turns from a courteous boy into a sullen hero haunted by the past. Katherine Hemple Prown's examination on the manuscripts of *Wise Blood* endorses this change; the earlier manuscripts subsume many innocuous, if not so openly affirmative, descriptions about the female characters, some of whose traces are left in "The Train," while the later ones impose distinctively negative images upon them. Prown concludes that this change coincides with the process in which the novel develops into the male quest narrative in which women are assigned miner roles, and that O'Connor tried to prove herself as a writer by writing the novel that is often regarded as the superior form by the masculine intellectual establishment. Whereas Prown's assertion that O'Connor had been trying to identify herself with the male intellect seems right, I want to suggest that what can also be found in these two different versions of the female characters is the figure of a young female writer who is struggling to find her expression that is innately discordant with the southern femininity. The representation of Haze's mother in "The Train" indeed seems adiaphorous yet at the same time she is rather a stereotype of a southern country woman softened and coated with sentimentality. Instead of following the conventional view of femininity that is marked by gentility, moderateness and compassion, in the published version of the novel O'Connor makes the mother break out from where she is confined; she describes, with her outlandish imagination, the maternal figure not as the object of the protagonist's reminiscence but as the rebellious corpse continually springing up.

In rediscovering the maternal figure as the one that ceaselessly comes back to horrify the protagonist, O'Connor, albeit unwittingly, hurls on readers the question of whether a woman can write otherwise. While her writing seems to be often masculinistic in describing the feminine in a negative way, her extremely violent imaginative power, which many a time comes close to childish maliciousness, enables her to distance herself from southern standard of femininity acclaiming ladylike sophistication and graciousness. And even more significantly, the act of writing seems to prepare her the opportunity to keep herself confronting with such femininity. The last paragraph of the novel epitomizes this confrontation:

> The outline of a skull was plain under his skin and deep burned eye

> sockets seemed to lead into the dark tunnel where he had disappeared. She leaned closer and closer to his face, looking deep into them, trying to see how she had been cheated or what had cheated her, but she couldn't see anything. She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light. (*CW* 131)

It is clear that this description is the repetition of that in the first chapter of the novel: "The outline of a skull under his skin was plain and insistent. ... his eyes were what held her attention longest. Their settings were so deep that they seemed, to her, almost like passages leading somewhere and she leaned halfway across the space that separated the two seats, trying to see into them"(*CW* 3-4). With her eyes closed, Mrs. Flood sees Hazel Motes become the pin point of light. Though she sees an unordinary vision before her closed eyes, she still does not understand either "what had cheated her" or why he blinded himself; she does not even know that he is dead. The landlady, the only possible witness to the protagonist's death, just bluntly exposes her ignorance about the spiritual significance of what is happening before her eyes.[11] Yet what is important here is not the meaning of this strange encounter, but what the landlady does in the face of the blind; by closing her eyes, she unwittingly repeats the action of the protagonist's self-blinding, an incomprehensible violence he imposed upon his own body. The action on the part of the landlady nullifies the tension between departure and homecoming that has driven the novel so far. In this act of repetition, she turns homecoming into departure and puts the novel back to its opening, where Mrs. Hitchcock is waiting to begin "the beginning of something she couldn't begin." That O'Connor closes her first novel with this passage seems to illuminate the course her writing would begin to follow, since her stories written thereafter prepares the same old banal woman as Mrs. Flood and the same old banal reader who would not exactly know what she does. O'Connor says in one letter to her literary agent Elizabeth McKee: "I don't have my novel outlined and I have to write to discover what I am doing. ... I don't know so well what I think until I see what I say; then I have to say it over again" (HB 5). *Wise Blood*, the first novel written by O'Connor,

definitely testifies her own beginning to "say it over again" through her writing.

Notes

[1] In the "Author's Note," O'Connor writes: " That belief in Christ is to some a matter of life and death has been a stumbling block for readers who would prefer to think it a matter of no great consequence. For them Hazel Motes' integrity lies in his trying with such vigor to get rid of the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind. For the author Hazel's integrity lies in his not being able to" (*CW* 1265). Discussions upon the novel have basically been poled between those who emphasize "his not being able to" and those who do not. For a detailed examination on the historical reception of the novel, see Kreyling 1-24, and also Crews 143-167.

[2] See, for example, the passage from the essay titled "On Her Own Work": "...in my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work" (*Mystery and Manners* 112).

[3] Such contrivance is often been ascribed to the author's technical immaturity. For example, Ben Satterfield declares that the ambiguity of *Wise Blood* is "a result of artistic failure or clumsiness" (Satterfield 35). Though Satterfield goes too far in deciding that O'Connor is "a religious propagandist of minor importance who wrote didactic fiction" (Satterfield 48), critics generally admit the problematic obscurity the novel has. As a result, it is often discussed separately from the later (and presumably better) works. However, *Wise Blood* has many motives and images that would be recurrently used in later short stories and it is significant to reconsider the novel as the "beginning" of O'Connor's repetitive writing.

[4] O'Connor emphasizes, rather heavily, the symbolic mother-child relationship between Mrs. Watts and Haze: "Mrs. Watts eyed him steadily with only a slight smirk. Then she put her other hand under his face and tickled it in a motherly way. 'That's okay, son,' she said. 'Momma don't mind if you ain't a preacher' " (*CW* 18).

[5] Enoch episodes are often regarded as the ones that might cause disturbance to the presumed unity of the novel, yet the fact that his remark finally became the title of the novel reveals the significance of his episodes. O'Connor herself emphasizes the necessity of them in one letter to John Hawkes: "it is strange that in both these novels [*Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*], what makes them possible as novels, I mean what makes them work, is the same thing that detracts or lowers the interest. I couldn't have written WB without Enoch. It would have been impossible mechanically" (*The Habit of Being*, henceforth HB, 353). Moreover, O'Connor confides in one letter to "A" that while she had enormous difficulty in characterizing the protagonist, she "never had a moment's thought over Enoch" and "everything Enoch

said and did was as plain to me as my hand" (*HB* 117). Considering the ease and the affinity the author had felt in characterizing Enoch, it is not so irrelevant to examine his episodes with reference to the main plot of Hazel Motes.

[6] Significantly, O'Connor tells her correspondent Robie Macauley about Enoch's father as follows: "You will be interested to know about Enoch's daddy. I had him inside that ape suit at first...and thought it was terribly funny but Caroline [Gordon] said No and she was right. It was a little too logical. Old man Emery has to keep away from Enoch because Enoch makes him break out. He broke out in the ape suit—hives. He is after Enoch and hopes someday to kill him. He keeps Baby Ruth candy bars full of arsenic in his pocket all the time so he can offer Enoch if he meets him..." (*HB* 35).

[7] A similar narrative strategy is taken in the scene of Enoch's transformation. After Enoch puts on the ape-suit, the narrator refers to him only as "it" or "the gorilla" (*CW* 111-12).

[8] Such obvious contradiction has provided the grounds for the arguments that emphasize "demonic" or "heretic" quality of O'Connor's fiction. Discussions by the critics such as John Hawkes and André Bleikasten still seem valid in acknowledging some literalness in O'Connor's preference for violence.

[9] In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva explains how the maternal remains as the abject, as what is ineffable and thus horrible, after the separation of child from mother. According to Kristeva, the only agent that enables the abjection is what she calls "Imaginary father" whose forgiveness "takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting" (Kristeva 45). This somewhat sentimental account of the abjection is undoubtedly conjured up by Judeo-Christian concept of father-child relationship.

[10] Earlier critics such as Josephine Hendin have discussed this problem with reference to O'Connor's relationship with her mother and her personal dilemma in playing a role of dutiful daughter. Their argument is to some point convincing since the troublesome mother/child relationship O'Connor repeatedly depicted in her fiction seems to reflect her own circumstances. In recent studies, the problematic representations of femininity in O'Connor's fiction is attributed more to the author's conflict as a female writer living in southern society rather than to her personal feelings to her mother (the biography by Jean W. Cash is also skeptic about directly linking O'Connor's life with her fiction). Studies that discuss the problem of O'Connor's authorship in southern context are as follows: Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*; Patricia Smith Yaeger, "The Woman without Any Bones: Anti-Angel Aggression in *Wise Blood*"; Sara Gordon, *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination*; and Katherine Hemple Prown, *Revising Flannery O'Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship.*

[11] In this sense Mrs. Flood embodies a figure of reader with whom O'Connor would have a life-time hostile relationship. While she often condemns the modern secular

readers' ignorance to the theological meaning of her fiction, she still shows a curious insistence on writing for them. In one letter to "A," she writes: "My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for" (*HB* 92). For the extended discussions on the author's sense of audience, see Carol Shloss, 21-37, and Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., 163-94.

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