

# Socking the Angel

**A** SEMI-INVALID STRICKEN YOUNG WITH lupus who lived with her mother in a small Georgia town and attended Mass every morning, Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) is the most famous Roman Catholic writer America has produced, and enjoys a reputation for extraordinary devoutness. Robert Lowell, in one of his manic transports, called for her canonization while she was still alive, and although for her part she would condemn her own envy, sloth, gluttony, and pride, to the more forgiving observer she resembled the woman in the tombstone limerick for whom death holds no terrors: born a virgin, died a virgin, no hits, no runs, no errors.

Yet as Brad Gooch's fine new biography of O'Connor, *Flannery*, details, her relations with the heavenly powers were never smooth or simple. As she wrote to her friend Betty Hester, she suffered the childhood conniptions that many a young person educated by nuns must endure, though hers took a form unprecedented in the literature of impiety:

I went to the Sisters to school for the first 6 years or so. They administer the True Faith with large doses of Pious Crap and at their hands I developed something the Freudians have not named—anti-angel aggression, call it. From 8 to 12 years it was my habit to seclude myself in a locked room every so often and with a fierce (and evil) face, whirl around in a circle with my fists knotted, socking the angel. This was the guardian angel with whom the Sisters assured us we were all equipped. He never left you. My dislike of him was poisonous.

Fortunately for her, God in his mercy drained the poison from her heart, and she forgot all about angels for a long time. Then she received a card with a prayer to the Archangel Raphael that asks him to direct us to “the province of joy so that we may not be ignorant of the concerns of our true country. All this led me to find out eventually what angels were, or

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anyway what they were not. And what they are not is a big comfort to me.”

O'Connor does not elaborate, but one gathers that she was relieved to discover that angels are not severe sentinels flaying wayward souls but rather loving guides to the bliss we hope for. To be on the side of the angels was O'Connor's fervent wish, but she understood that her writing may not immediately appear sanctified. Especially in her letters to persons struggling with questions of faith, she describes her art as the effort to serve God with her talent but to leave its ultimate effects up to Him.

“You do not write the best you can for the sake of art but for the sake of returning your talent increased to the invisible God to use or not use as he sees fit.” Wielding her gift with integrity is the

best she can expect from herself. That her nature may well produce a work that orthodoxy frowns upon does not mean she ought to muzzle her singularity. She is tickled when the first priest to say “turkey-dog” in praise of her work pays a call on her, but she is not looking for a churchly imprimatur on her writing.

**O**'CONNOR BEGAN WRITING STORIES and poems in 1943 for the student literary magazine at the Georgia State College for Women, and made a sufficient impression to be accepted as a graduate student in the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa. As she began to send her stories to magazines, rejections were easier to come by than acceptances, but in due course the *Sewanee Review*, *Partisan Review*, and even *Mademoiselle* recognized her talent and published her early stuff.

She started in on a novel at Iowa, and continued working on it at the Yaddo artists' colony in upstate New York, where the bohemian drinking and fornication appalled her. She signed a contract with Rinehart but the editor there disliked the strange direction in which the novel was headed; after some contentious exchanges Rinehart released her from the contract, and she caught on with Harcourt,

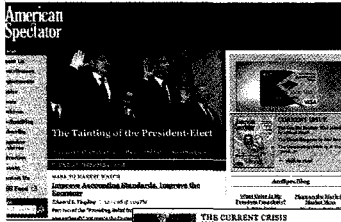
**Flannery: A Life of Flannery O'Connor**

By Brad Gooch

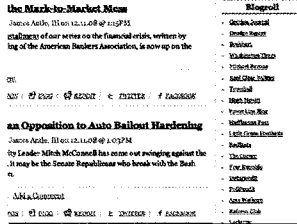
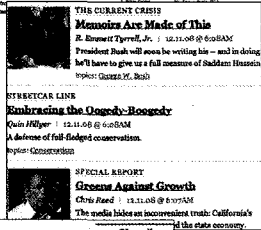
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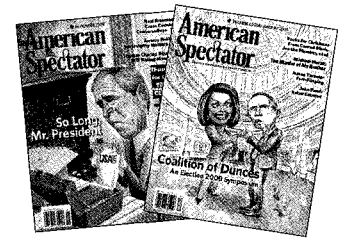


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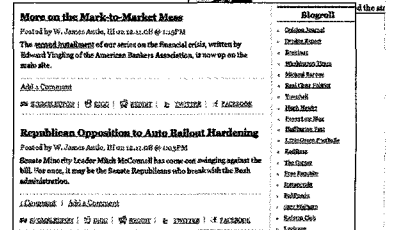
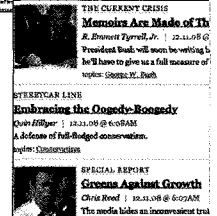
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\*Often.

Brace, where the editor Robert Giroux would become a lifelong friend.

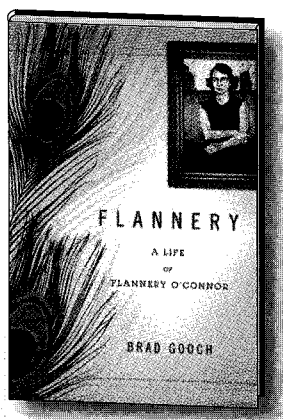
O'Connor had just finished the first draft of *Wise Blood* in 1951 when she became seriously ill with what appeared to be rheumatoid arthritis but was subsequently diagnosed as lupus erythematosus, an auto-immune disease that ravages connective tissue and various organs, and that had killed her father at the age of 41. This chronic illness robbed her of the life she had expected to have. Her efforts to make an independent life for herself up north were foiled, and she settled in with her mother in Milledgeville; she would say that her best writing was done there, and that she could therefore consider her affliction a blessing.

She wrote terribly slowly, and in her short life turned out two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), and two collections of stories, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (1955) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (published posthumously in 1965). Her letters, collected in *The Habit of Being* (1979), display her gift, even her vocation, for friendship under the aspect of eternity; she writes of her belief, and her struggle against unbelief, in warm and theologically subtle tones, exhorting her correspondents and herself to aspire toward spiritual beauty, however the times might have stacked the deck against such aspirations.

Yet to the end her fiction was longer on spiritual ugliness and defeat than on beauty and fulfillment. She professed herself a Catholic writer, indeed declared that she wrote because she was a Catholic, but the reader who has only the novels and stories to go by may be forgiven for supposing their author something of a God-haunted nihilist.

In *Wise Blood* Hazel Motes returns from the war to his flyspeck hometown only to find it completely defunct; so he sets out for the big city of Taulkinham, where he gets his first taste of whoredom, shacks up with a 15-year-old girl who finds his pecan-colored eyes irresistible, and becomes a streetcorner preacher, proclaiming the Church Without Christ.

"Listen, you people, I'm going to take the truth with me wherever I go," Haze called. "I'm going to preach it to whoever'll listen at whatever place. I'm going to preach there was no Fall because there was nothing to fall from and no



Redemption because there was no Fall and no Judgment because there wasn't the first two. Nothing matters but that Jesus was a liar."

O'Connor shows herself master of a racy vernacular that brilliantly renders the comic agonies of half-wits and fanatics, but she presents neither normality nor transcendence by way of contrast. Motes murders a rival prophet whom he considers a charlatan, then blinds himself with quicklime as expiation, removing the mote from his eye in drastic fashion so that he might be vouchsafed an inner vision.

He is murdered in turn by a pair of thuggish policemen, and in death leads his landlady, who had fallen in love with him in her grasping way, toward an intimation of distant light shining—perhaps vanishing—in the darkness.

It may be O'Connor intends that the reader recognize Motes's holiness and be left to consider the beam in his own eye; she suggests as much in some of her letters. Yet Motes's fate, however lurid, never does rise much above the ridiculous, and certainly fails to bear the weight of serious prophecy and ritual sacrifice. Whether to trust O'Connor's professed pious intentions for the novel or her spiritually anarchic achievement remains the reader's dilemma.

**T**HE VIOLENT BEAR IT AWAY returns to the theme of whether the hottest spiritual ardor is true prophecy or gross delusion, and succeeds more ably than the earlier novel in establishing a tone of addled solemnity that allows the main issue its full complication. The 14-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater has been brought up in backwoods isolation by his visionary great-uncle, who would periodically go off into the wilderness to contend with the Lord. "He would look as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes, wheels of light and strange beasts with giant wings of fire and four heads turned to the four points of the universe."

When the great-uncle dies, Tarwater sets their house on fire and heads off for the city, to look for an uncle who had run away from what he considered the patriarch's madness and had become a conventional, reasonable man, a schoolteacher. The uncle greets Tarwater as a fellow refugee from unholy lunacy, and hopes to bring him up himself and undo

the damage done. The novel presents the struggle for Tarwater's soul: he drowns the uncle's retarded son while baptizing him, is drugged and raped by a diabolical stranger, torches his native woods, anoints himself with dirt from his great-uncle's grave, and heads off into the great world to prophesy to the unbelievers. O'Connor's prose rises to towering eloquence in describing his calling:

He knew that this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in the instant speak to him. He threw himself to the ground and with his face against the dirt of the grave, he heard the command. GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY. The words were as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood.

Is this genuine holiness descending upon the Lord's appointed prophet, or is it an especially intoxicating brand of madness, maybe even the devil's work? Brad Gooch lays out the evidence from O'Connor's letters and essays for her belief that Motes and Tarwater were truly touched by God, but he also cites the opinion of the novelist John Hawkes, a friend and correspondent of O'Connor's, "that hers was a 'black,' even 'diabolical,' authorial voice." O'Connor assured Hawkes it wasn't so, but, dubious as it may be to question the word of a virtual saint, the books appear lit by a fire from below that bespeaks not the terrible speed of mercy but the terrible slowness with which the tormented soul is consumed. O'Connor died at 39. To judge from her fiction, she had likely had all she could take. ❁

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## Radical Sick

**Y**OUNG CHE IS THE LATEST ADDITION to the vast flood of devotional literature on the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary Ernesto ("Che") Guevara. At first blush, the inexhaustible appetite for this sort of thing is mystifying. Surely everything that could be said on the subject has had plenty of time to see the light of day? It has been a good 40 years since Guevara was captured and executed in Bolivia, 50 since he landed in Cuba with Fidel Castro to fight his way to power, 60 since he departed his native Argentina to make his way around Latin America. The revolution for which he is known (now celebrating—if that is the right word—its 50th year) has reduced Cuba to ruin. No Latin American country, not even Chávez's Venezuela, is pursuing his recipes for social transformation. Paradoxically, Guevara's star shines brightest in countries that have never known violent revolution and are not likely to know it in the future.

The phenomenon of Che nostalgia is now a decade old. It feeds principally on the end of the Cold War, which allows the figure of Guevara to be conveniently decoupled from the monstrosity that was Communism (a process that would have caused him no end of indignation were he here to see it). Under these circumstances he becomes merely a generic rebel, a kind of meaningless icon ripe for an Annie Leibovitz portrait in *Vanity Fair*. Young people in what the *New York Times* likes to call "rich countries" mindlessly don T-shirts emblazoned with his image; his brand is even purloined by manufacturers of cheap watches and beer!

Apparently to restore some ideological meaning to his figure, Guevara's epigones have been busily at work. The latest contribution is the volume under review, which is really two books in one. The first, by the revolutionary's father, appeared in Spanish as long ago as 1981 and is available in English for the first time. The second is a collection of Che's letters

**Young Che: Memories of Che Guevara by His Father**  
 By Ernesto Guevara Lynch  
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**Reviewed by Mark Falcoff**

**Mark Falcoff** is resident scholar emeritus at the American Enterprise Institute, and author, among other books, of *Cuba the Morning After: Confronting Castro's Legacy* (AEI Press).