

ONOMASTIC REVISIONS
IN FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S WISE BLOOD

Paul F. Ferguson

Brockport, New York

After some delay, Wise Blood, Flannery O'Connor's first novel, was finally published by Harcourt, Brace in May, 1952. Better than four chapters of the total fourteen had been published earlier as short stories. "The Train," an early version of chapter one, was the fifth and last story in O'Connor's M.A. thesis and appeared in Sewanee Review in April, 1948. "The Heart of the Park," chapter five in the novel, was published by Partisan Review in February, 1949. In December of that same year, Partisan Review also ran "The Peeler," which later became chapter two. All three of these stories were probably written before June, 1947, early enough for Paul Engle, O'Connor's mentor at Iowa's Writers' Workshop, to recommend her for the Rinehart-Iowa Fiction Award for a first novel, which she won. A fourth story, "Enoch and the Gorilla," which constitutes chapters eleven and twelve, was published by New World Writing in April, 1952, one month prior to the publication of the novel.

Early critics were less than kind to Wise Blood. Typical is Melvin J. Friedman's remark that the novel

was merely a number of "short stories strung together to form a novel."¹ Yet O'Connor's own testimony makes it clear that Wise Blood was designed as a novel from the beginning. In a letter to Elizabeth McKee dated June 19, 1948, O'Connor wrote, "I have been on the novel a year and a half and will probably be two more years finishing it."² During the next few years, O'Connor spent considerable time rewriting. Robert Giroux reread the manuscript several times and no doubt suggested changes. Caroline Gordon, too, apparently recommended substantial revisions in a late draft, revisions which O'Connor made willingly. As a result, the finished novel is quite different in concept from the short stories. Hazel Motes' efforts to establish the Church Without Christ, the central concern of the novel, is not even hinted at in the stories. And while each of the stories turns on a moment of revelation during which the protagonist apprehends some truth about himself, the novel is less concerned with instantaneous epiphanies than with Hazel Motes' growing awareness of his nascent Christianity.

The novel is about Motes' attempts to found a nihilistic church based on the notion that religious belief inhibits freedom. Motes' Church Without Christ attracts an assortment of oddballs, including Enoch Emery, a teenager whose diet consists of **pea soup and chocolate**

milk shakes, and who eventually runs off to become Gonga the Gorilla; Sabbath Lily Hawks, Motes' mistress and the Church's unofficial madonna; and Asa Hawks, a blind prophet who, in fact, is neither blind nor a "true" prophet. Motes' attempt fails, but his failure restores in him a fundamental understanding of Christ's meaning, and he becomes a Christian martyr.

The changes in the stories incorporated into Wise Blood and the thematic importance of such changes have been adequately discussed elsewhere by Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain³ and need not concern us here. What does concern us are the onomastic revisions O'Connor made prior to the publication of her novel. At least four of the characters who appear in Wise Blood appear in one or more of the four short stories: Hazel Motes, the novel's protagonist; Enoch Emery, Motes' disciple; Asa Hawks, a blind street preacher; and Sabbath Lily Hawks, the preacher's sluttish daughter. Of these four, only Enoch Emery retains the same name he had in the short stories. Asa Hawks is called Asa Moats in "The Heart of the Park" and Asa Shrike in "The Peeler." His daughter is Sabbath Moats in "The Heart of the Park," and is given the fuller name Sabbath Lily Hawks only in the novel. Hazel Motes is known as Hazel Wickers in "The Train," Hazel Weaver in "The Heart of the Park," and Hazel Motes in "The Peeler."

The given names of these characters do not change, and suggest a common thematic link between the short stories and the novel into which the stories were incorporated. All are derived from the Old Testament. The name "Sabbath," although not a proper name in the Old Testament, obviously refers to the day made holy by the Lord, the day on which God was to be honored. The importance of the name in Wise Blood is suggested when Sabbath reveals that "My mother named me that just after I was born because I was born on the Sabbath and then she turned over in her bed and died and I never seen her" (WB, p.66). The name is ironic since the sluttish young woman who bears it is not at all holy, is in the service of a false and worldly religion, and ultimately becomes the madonna for Motes' nihilistic church. Indeed, her name is more appropriately associated with the witch's Sabbath or Sabbat, that grim, Satanic parody of Christian worship.

The name "Lily" echoes the passage on Faith from Matthew 6: "Consider how the lilies of the field grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these." The lily is associated with the faithful, who are cared for by the Lord. But it is also associated with the transitory and corruptible: "But if God so

clothes the grass which flourishes today but tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more you, o you of little faith." It is in this second sense that Sabbath Lily Hawks is appropriately named, for, corrupt and faithless herself, she is a corrupter of others, successfully seducing Motes to get away from her father.

Her father, Asa Hawks, is named after a king of Juda who did God's will by removing all idols from Juda, but who, in his conflict with the king of Israel, allied himself with the king of Syria instead of placing his trust in God (II Chronicles 14). Angered at the seer Hanani, who rebuked him for his lack of faith, Asa imprisoned the seer. God subsequently afflicted Asa with a great illness, but instead of seeking God's help, Asa trusted in the skill of his physicians and died.

The story of King Asa is essentially the story of one who begins his career as God's champion, but who ultimately loses his faith, turns against God, and is punished. The career of Asa Hawks parallels that of King Asa in many respects. Although he appears only as a name in "The Heart of the Park" and as Asa Shrike in "The Peeler," he is perceptive enough to recognize that Hazel Motes has "the urge for Jesus" in his voice. We see him in "The Peeler" as one of O'Connor's obsessive preachers who, although a fanatic, nevertheless possesses

the truth. It is only in Wise Blood that we see Asa Hawks as a fraud and a failed prophet. Like the biblical Asa, Hawks started his career as the Lord's champion, preaching the redemption with fanatical fervor, and promised to blind himself as Saint Paul had been blinded "to justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him" (p.64). But at the crucial moment, his hands filled with lime, he lost the courage. From that point on he played the role of the blind preacher, still preaching redemption, but with insufficient faith to act upon his belief.

Enoch Emery takes his given name from one of the Old Testament prophets. The biblical Enoch, a direct descendant of Seth, the son of Adam who replaced Abel, found such favor with God that he was taken directly to heaven, body and soul, according to Genesis 5:24. Saint Paul cites Enoch as one of the prime examples of the man of perfect faith: "By faith Enoch was taken up lest he should see death; and he was not found because God took him up. For before he was taken up he had testimony that he pleased God, and without faith it is impossible to please God."

It is interesting to note that while the Book of Enoch is considered apocryphal, some of the prophecies were not. The epistle of Saint Jude cites one of them: "Behold, the Lord has come with thousands of his holy

ones to execute judgment upon all, and to convict all the impious of all their impious works, and of all the hard things that impious sinners have spoken against Him" (Jude: 14-16). The prophecy Jude cites foretells the final judgment and warns the faithful to beware of heretics and the heresies they breed.

The parallels between Enoch Emery and the biblical Enoch are largely contrastive. Enoch Emery is certainly the most faithful of Hazel Motes' disciples. Not only does he follow Motes everywhere, he also warns Motes away from the "heresy" of Asa Hawks, the Jesus fanatic. The Church Without Christ holds great appeal for this boy who had been "sanctified crazy" at the Rodemill Bible Academy and who now spends most of his time at the movies when he is not working as a zookeeper. He even manages to provide a "Jesus" for this Church Without Christ in the form of a shrunken mummy he has stolen from the park's museum. And like the biblical Enoch, he is "seen no more," rewarded by his god by being translated into Gonga the Gorilla.

The name "Hazel" does not appear to be a biblical name. As a simple attributive name, it may suggest the hazel bush. Hazel wood, according to popular legend, is supposed to have magical qualities, as one is reminded in Yeats' "Song of the Wandering Aengus." And divining

rods are presumably made from hazel wood. Haze, the diminutive form of the name, as others have noted, suggests an obscurity of vision corresponding to the character's spiritual blindness in both the short stories and the novel. Nevertheless, the name "Hazel" may be a variant of the biblical name "Hazael," one of the many Syrian kings whom God had raised to persecute Israel for the sins of Jeroboam. Jeroboam was guilty of idolatry, and his sin was apparently carried down through several generations. Hazael thus served as a scourge and punishment for infidelity.

Hazel Motes functions in a similar fashion. Himself an unbeliever (he preaches the church "where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way...the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption" p.60), he serves as a scourge to those who follow false religions, from the secular religion of the streetcorner huckster selling potato peelers, to the hypocritical evangelism of Asa Hawks, to the con game of Onnie Jay Holy's Church of Christ Without Christ.

The names derived from the bible thus appear to be functional in both the short stories and the novel by suggesting the values from which the characters depart and by which their actions are to be judged. They are also linked to the problem of idolatry and false religion,

which, almost a non-issue in "The Train," becomes more and more prominent in "The Heart of the Park," "The Peeler," and "Enoch and the Gorilla," and finally becomes a central concern in Wise Blood.

But what of O'Connor's onomastic revisions? If we assume that the order of publication is also the order of composition, we can discern an important shift in two surnames. Hazel is the only one of the four characters I've mentioned who appears in the first of the short stories, "The Train." Here his surname is "Wickers," which suggests the thin, pliable twig used for making baskets. It might also suggest "wicked" or "wicca," the Anglo-Saxon word for "wizard" or "witch." In "The Heart of the Park," Wickers has become Weaver, a natural change since wicker is woven into baskets. In the same story, we are introduced to the blind preacher whose surname is Moats. The word "moat" refers to a water-filled ditch surrounding a castle. If O'Connor was thinking of the name meaning at all, she was probably thinking of the stagnancy of the water rather than of its protective nature. In any event, she must have realized that the name in this form was inappropriate for this character, for she subsequently changed it.

Nevertheless, the name "Moats" probably suggested to her the homonym "motes," for we find the homonym

given to Hazel in the third story, "The Peeler." The name "Motes" invariably echoes the passage from Matthew 7:3: "But why dost thou see the mote in thy brother's eye, and yet dost not consider the beam in thy own eye?" Coupled with the diminutive "Haze," the name "Motes" reinforces the imagery of vision and blindness which is beginning to emerge in the short stories and blooms into a central motif in the novel.

When Haze has become Motes in "The Peeler," Moats has become Shrike. The change here does not seem to be of major importance since Shrike does not actually appear in the story. But with the name "Shrike," O'Connor acknowledges her debt to Nathanael West whose novel Miss Lonelyhearts exerted an important influence on her writing in general and on Wise Blood in particular. However, O'Connor apparently discerned that her blind preacher was not at all like the Shrike of Miss Lonelyhearts and decided to change his name once again.

When he appears again in Wise Blood, he is Hawks. The transition from Shrike to Hawks is not particularly striking since both names align the character with birds of prey and work well in conjunction with the animal imagery O'Connor frequently uses to describe her characters. Hawks, however, not only suggests the bird of prey, but also functions within the motif of vision and

blindness. The hawk, after all, is known for its keen eyesight, and Hawks, pretending physical blindness, at least has a keen insight into what drives Hazel Motes. Hawks also suggests streetcorner peddling. When we first see Asa Hawks, he is vying for customers with a street vendor who is trying to sell potato peelers. Finally, Hawks may also allude to the unclean birds proscribed by Jewish dietary law in Leviticus 11:16 and Deuteronomy 14:15. O'Connor makes much of cleanness and uncleanness, largely with reference to Motes, but very early in the novel Motes says to Hawks, "I'm as clean as you are," and Hawks replies, "Fornication and blasphemy and what else?" (p.33). Hawks' response, in the overall context of the novel, is both an accusation and a confession.

The change in these two surnames from short story to novel represent a sharpening in O'Connor's perception of her characters and an enlargement of her theme. While the short stories operate almost exclusively on a personal level, dealing with a moment of spiritual insight experienced by a protagonist, Wise Blood operates on both a personal and a public level. The novel not only traces Hazel Motes' pilgrimage toward redemption, his growing awareness of his own corruption, and his movement from unbelief to an acceptance of Christ, it also demonstrates the effects he has, for good or ill, on others. The name

changes are, in part, clues to this development. Wickers merely suggests the reduction of the human to the subhuman, and stresses the character's moral thinness and spiritual pliability. Weaver restores some of the character's humanity, but it also raises certain questions. What does Hazel weave? Is he a weaver of lies? Perhaps. It is only when he becomes Hazel Motes that he becomes a fully realized character whose name also carries symbolic resonance. Only a Hazel Motes can function on a public level as a persecutor of idolators and chastiser of infidels while at the same time undergoing a personal change from the spiritually blind sinner who can see the mote in his brother's eye but not the beam in his own, to the physically blind seer very much aware of his own corruption.

Similarly, the growth of the blind preacher from Moats to Shrike to Hawks signals a growing reconception of character from the merely subhuman to something much more complex. Asa Hawks is not simply a charlatan. It is true that he is responsible for transforming religion into a marketable commodity to be hawked on street corners. But he, too, has been a destroyer of idols, and still is a purveyor of truth. And like the hawk, he has spiritual insight. But like the hawk he is unclean to the extent that he is unready or unwilling to carry his insights

and his perceptions of truth into action.

The surnames Hawks and Motes, too, interact with each other in the novel as the surnames in the short stories never interact. Since both names are linked with sight, they become part of the metaphorical pattern of vision and blindness that operates throughout the novel. The same connection establishes a closer relationship between these two characters than is possible in the short stories. Motes, at the end of the novel, acknowledges his spiritual kinship with Hawks by blinding himself with lime as Hawks had tried to do. In effect, Motes acknowledges the common humanity both share and takes Hawks' punishment upon himself. Furthermore, the blindness that Hawks and Motes share reflects the blindness of the larger society.⁴

Finally, these two surnames reveal that O'Connor was becoming more onomastically aware as an artist. What she learned about names and naming in the process of revising Wise Blood contributed significantly to her development as a mature writer. The names in Wise Blood exhibit a sharpness, a clarity, and a symbolic resonance which was not apparent in the short stories prior to the novel. Here, for the first time, O'Connor employed names as a primary vehicle for meaning in her fiction, and was to do so for the remainder of her career. For O'Connor, names in fiction are sacramental, visible signs of the invisible world, the evidence of things unseen.

NOTES

¹Melvin J. Friedman, "Flannery O'Connor: Another Legend in Southern Fiction." English Journal, 51 (1962), p.240.

²Flannery O'Connor: The Habit of Being, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979), p.4.

³Leon Driskell and Joan Brittain, The Eternal Crossroads (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1971), pp. 33-58.

⁴It is useful to note in this respect that many of the novel's characters are Motes' doubles--Hoover Shoats by virtue of his rhyming name; Solace Layfield, the false preacher Shoats hires to be his prophet, by virtue of his physical resemblance to Motes.

Paul F. Ferguson
Brockport, New York