

*THE PRISON OF THE SELF:
ISOLATION IN FLANNERY
O'CONNOR'S FICTION*

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In his significant study of the romance tradition in American literature, Richard Chase writes that "solipsism, hypnotic self-regard, imprisonment within the self—these themes have absorbed American novelists."¹ Many American writers from Charles Brockden Brown to Flannery O'Connor have portrayed the solitary individual who defiantly or fearfully faces the knowledge of his isolation. Although a few authors have celebrated the rugged individualism of the American who takes charge of his own destiny despite the obstacles which he faces, many others—as Chase intimates—portray the dangers of an exaggerated emphasis on the self which lead to imprisonment within the self rather than to freedom for growth. Disregarding others, the solitary person—Ahab pursuing the whale, for example—becomes finally cut off from the community through his "hypnotic self-regard." Rather than being freed through his quest, the seeker finds only another emanation of the self. The quest outward turns inward: the isolation has become complete. The quester loves himself so much that he cannot escape his self-made prison.

Irving Malin summarizes the case as he says that in new American Gothic "characters are isolated; they do not and cannot belong to the outside world. This lack of communication creates anxiety. They do not know where to turn for assistance and comfort. Gradually they turn more and more inward (the buried life becomes crucial), and they realize at last that their only 'inseparable love' is the mirror."²

Many of Flannery O'Connor's characters become fearful and defensive as they begin to sense their isolation from others. Only a few defy the universe in the grand manner of the Captain Ahab's of nineteenth-century Gothic. Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* is, however, a notable example of one who does accept and embrace his isolation from others. Unlike his anxious double, Enoch Emery, who is constantly seeking friends, Hazel avoids close

1. *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday and Co., 1957), p. 107.

2. *New American Gothic* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 15.

relationships with others. Although he necessarily has some contacts with people as he preaches, his primary purpose is never to establish relationships but to proclaim the truth as he perceives it. He preaches the existential message that man is essentially a homeless creature who must make his own "place." "Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place."³ Neither looking to the sky above nor to the earth below will prove beneficial: "In yourself right now is all the place you've got." Disturbing words, these. And Hazel's life is largely an attempt to find that place within himself—without the aid of others. Although he has brief relationships with women, he isn't seeking companionship so much as he is trying to establish an intellectual point; and the women exacerbate rather than relieve his sense of isolation. Hazel rejects men too: he certainly doesn't wish to befriend Enoch, who in some ways represents the instinctual side of Hazel's nature; nor can he tolerate his miserable *Doppelgänger*, Solace Layfield, the false prophet who reflects too painfully another hidden aspect of Hazel's life. Like many split persons in Gothic fiction, Hazel finds no satisfaction or completion in his double.

Hazel consciously seeks separation from others: he welcomes the further isolation which blindness brings. But it is instructive to note that despite his conscious efforts, terrifying images of isolation pervade his subconscious mind. Particularly one may note the many coffins which clutter his dream world in the first chapter of the novel and which culminate in his imagining himself within a coffin, his mother's. The images of confinement are developed further: the restroom stall where he finds Leora Watts' name is described as a coffin-like "narrow box"; when he visits Mrs. Watts "his heart began to grip him like a little ape clutching the bars of its cage" (p. 37); later while sleeping in the Essex he dreams that "he was not dead but only buried. . . . [and] waiting on nothing" (p. 88). In this dream he becomes—like the despised mummy—a man on display whom people can see but not touch. The cage which Hazel subconsciously fears becomes finally the tunnel—in Mrs. Flood's perception—into which he disappears. Hazel has chosen isolation and dies defiantly alone.

Many characters in O'Connor's fiction are lonely and isolated, some—like Hazel—by their own design and many others because they cannot avoid it. Even the garrulous Mrs. Flood senses that "the world is an empty place" and wishes to fill a corner of the emptiness with a husband. Of course, not all the isolated characters take their isolation as seriously as does the rebellious prophet, Hazel Motes, nor do all of them attempt to embrace it as he does. Some of the "misunderstood" intellectuals glory in

3. *Three* (New York: New American Library, 1962), p. 90. Further references to *Wise Blood* will be from this edition and will be cited within the text.

their sense of isolation and estrangement as do also some of the criminals—though for differing reasons; most of the lonely children are incapable of articulating their loneliness; and many of the ordinary characters only gradually become aware of the extent of their isolation. Others like Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation" look into the abyss and draw back. O'Connor's friend and editor, Robert Fitzgerald, has written that "almost all her people are displaced and some are either aware of it or become so. But it is not a sectional or regional condition; it is a religious condition, common to North and South alike, common indeed to the world we live in."⁴ Isolation, displacement, homelessness: this is the situation of many of O'Connor's characters. For a few—such as Guizac in "The Displaced Person"—this may involve a physical homelessness; for many others isolation means separation from family, from community, or from God. And often, too, the outward separation from others is a reflection of an inner entrapment, an imprisonment of the spirit.

Because the family is popularly considered the most intimate of primary groups, one might expect fictionists to show characters finding release from their terrible isolation in the warmth of familial relationships. In modern Gothic fiction, however, the family often does not fulfill its function, and the loneliness of its members may drive them outside the family to seek release elsewhere. Sometimes in O'Connor's fiction the fault lies with the parents; in other cases the children are to blame; or it may be that the husband or wife—as in "Parker's Back"—is unable to communicate his or her deep need to the marital partner. Whatever the specific cause of the isolation, many people in O'Connor's small families remain isolated from each other, bound by their self-love, their narcissism. Very often in their attempts to leave the confinements of the family, some of its members will go on literal journeys which take them outside the home, but the quest is seldom successful.

Perhaps it might be instructive to focus at greater length on one instance of an extended quest in O'Connor's fiction. In "The Artificial Nigger" young Nelson Head tries to leave, but he is inexorably drawn back. Even the description of the characters hints at the difficulty of escape, for the two Heads are presented as doubles: "They were grandfather and grandson but they looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age, for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy's look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it."⁵ Though the two may look like brothers, Mr. Head clearly perceives himself to be the leader: he believes he has that "calm understanding of life that makes him a suitable guide for the young"; he might in fact have been Raphael "awakened by a blast of God's light to fly to

4. "The Countryside and the True Country," *Sewanee Review*, 70 (1962), 394.

5. *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), p. 251. Further references to the story will be documented within the text.

the side of Tobias" (pp. 249, 250). To demonstrate his own superior knowledge and to expose the extent of Nelson's ignorance, Mr. Head plans to take the boy—who has spent almost his entire life on the isolated farm—on a trip to the city.

Despite Mr. Head's plan to teach the boy a lesson he will never forget, the day begins on a slightly sour note for him because Nelson, who is just as concerned with his self-image as his grandfather, manages to get up first and cook the breakfast. Once on the train, though, the old man asserts himself more successfully when Nelson, having never seen a Negro, fails to recognize one on the train. The boy begins to learn his "moral lesson": he realizes that "the old man would be his only support in the strange place they were approaching. He would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever lost from his grandfather" (p. 257). Soon after leaving the train—and hoping to retain his advantage—Mr. Head shows Nelson a sewer and explains the underground drainage system. Nelson is properly impressed by the sewer, which the reader may recognize as a modern counterpart to the underground tunnels in Gothic castles. The boy's self-confidence is shaken by the idea that a "man could slide into it and be sucked along down endless pitchback tunnels," and he connects the "sewer passages with the entrance to hell" (p. 259). Nelson intuitively senses that he has embarked upon a trip to an underworld which is more frightening and mysterious than anything he has known. Even the world aboveground becomes more eerie: houses begin to look rotten and the streets become narrower.

Alone in these frightening surroundings, the travellers realize that they are lost. Looking for help, Nelson asks for directions from a maternal black woman who strongly attracts him. Mr. Head scorns the boy's weakness in asking for directions, especially from a black stranger, and determines to teach the boy a more rigorous lesson. While Nelson sleeps beside the street, the old man slips away and then awakens him with a loud bang on a garbage pail. Terrified to see that he is alone, the boy runs down the street and smashes into a woman who screams that her ankle has been broken. When Mr. Head finally arrives, Nelson clings to him: he has learned something about his dependency on his grandfather. But Mr. Head's moment of supposed superiority passes immediately. To the angry woman who demands payment for damages, he says, "This is not my boy. . . . I never seen him before" (p. 265). With his denial of his grandson, his own image, he sees ahead of him "nothing but a hollow tunnel that had once been the street." He has now entered the lower circles of this underworld, this inferno, and the real hell is not within the city but within his own selfish, egocentric heart.

Having been rejected, Nelson now rejects all the overtures which the old man makes in his attempt to be reconciled. It is now Mr. Head's turn to feel the pangs of isolation: in the afternoon light his face "looked rav-

aged and abandoned. . . . He knew that now he was wandering into a black strange place where nothing was like it had ever been before" (p. 267). The two wander around hopelessly lost in the "endless ridiculous circles" of the suburban drives. In the extremity of his dejection and isolation Mr. Head, who had scorned the boy's weakness, now calls to a fat man, "Oh Gawd I'm Lost! Oh hep me Gawd I'm lost!" After receiving directions to the suburban train stop, the old man feels like someone "slowly returning from the dead."

Nelson still rejects him, however, until they see the third "Negro" of their trip, this one a decrepit plaster image with "a wild look of misery." Unlike the two previous Negroes whom they noticed, this one completely mystifies them. Perhaps the "artificial nigger" is too similar to the Heads themselves to be recognizable: observing the figure Mr. Head looked like an "ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man"; significantly, "it was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either" (p. 268). The artificial figure is clearly a reflection of the Heads.

This isolated, miserable figure, which is obviously important to one's understanding of the story, has been interpreted in a variety of ways. David Eggenschwiler, for example, writes that "Mr. Head and Nelson . . . sense not only that all men are as the figure but also that God, too, became that chipped and miserable creature, man."⁶ Peter L. Hays, on the other hand, argues that "the statue must represent Satan, and through him, the sin of pride."⁷ The Heads themselves believe the statue to be a "great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat" (p. 269). Discussing their reaction to the scene, Irving Malin writes, "The fact that a Negro can have a statue dedicated to him, they think, shows what a mysterious world it is!"⁸ In fact, the figure is not a monument to the victory of the Negro at all; what is being "immortalized" is this monument to the pride of the white man who glories in his ability to control and use the black man. And the "artificial nigger" to whom the Heads respond is actually a reflection of their own dark impulses, a mirroring of their own arrogance, pride, self-centeredness, and desire to control others.

"The Artificial Nigger" clearly follows the pattern of the romance quest with the questers now returning from their dangerous adventures to the sanctuary of their rustic isolation. Their return, Miles Orvell says, "is unambiguously a return from a fallen world to a world of grace."⁹ The imag-

6. *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1972), p. 89.

7. "Dante, Tobit, and 'The Artificial Nigger,'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, 5 (1968), 267.

8. *New American Gothic*, p. 67.

9. *Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1972), p. 157.

ery at the conclusion of the story, however, does not support such a direct assertion. The Heads return to their home "just as the moon, restored to its full splendor, sprang from a cloud and flooded the clearing with light" (p. 269). An initial reading would suggest that the weary travellers are being given special evidence of divine mercy—as Mr. Head believes. One recalls, though, that at the opening of the story the moon itself—in the old man's perception—seems to be a kind of mirror which reflects the noble Mr. Head: the moon appears "to contemplate itself with the look of a young man who sees his old age before him" (p. 249), a parallel to the young-old Mr. Head. And Head believes the moon has paused "as if it were waiting for his permission to enter"; its subsequent entrance is marked by its ennobling effect on the most humble objects in the room: even the slop jar becomes transformed into a "small personal angel" as Mr. Head views it. The language of the comic opening scene ought to be weighed against the "full splendor" of the moon at the conclusion. Have Mr. Head's perceptions changed?

On his return this honorable man who believes that his denial of Nelson was the first time he had stood in need of mercy, now stands "appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God" (p. 269). Orvell has written that "the [penultimate] paragraph does not add anything essential to the story";¹⁰ and his judgment is correct if Mr. Head has come to a genuine understanding of his own needs. But no doubt he has simply replaced one form of pride with another: he has judged himself with "the thoroughness of God"; he feels forgiven for his sins "from the beginning of time"; he is pleased at the extent of his sin "since God loved in proportion as he forgave" (pp. 269-270). Rather than being an artistic flaw, this paragraph is essential, for without it we would not see the depth of Mr. Head's pride and self-deception. He believes that the supernatural has shown special evidence of favor to him personally; now even his "sin" of pride has become a source of further pride.

Although the Heads have left their rural enclave for a day, they return to it now confirmed in their narcissism. Irving Malin observes that "new American Gothic presents ambivalent characters who want to see the big world but are afraid to leave the little world. They are locked in narcissism; often they enjoy such imprisonment. . . . The 'haunted castle' in new American Gothic usually functions as the metaphor of confining narcissism, the private world."¹¹ Still unaware of the real evil within themselves, the Heads imagine that they are secure from the wickedness of the city, whereas in fact they are locked in the complete isolation of their pride and self-love. Like many of O'Connor's characters they have had—at best—only a momentary glimpse of their need for mercy. Their imprisonment is complete.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 159.

11. *New American Gothic*, pp. 79-80.

