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UNLIKELY TRANSFUSIONS: WISE BLOOD AND THE GRAPES OF WRATH

JOHN SEELYE

THE LIST OF AMERICAN AUTHORS whose novels are indebted for situations and materials (and popularity) to the novels and stories of John Steinbeck is impressive, from Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* to Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings's *The Yearling* and Mary O'Hara's *My Friend Flicka*. I would like to add Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, a text clearly inspired by the surreal ironies of Nathaniel West and one that would seem to be whole worlds apart from the realistic, empathetic zone created by Steinbeck. Indeed, I had been teaching both *Wise Blood* and *Of Mice and Men* in an undergraduate course on the novella for a year or two before the possibility of a connection became clear, not with the story of Lennie and George but with the much more ambitious epic of the Joad family.

Tom Joad's return home from a stretch in prison for manslaughter is a memorable beginning for Steinbeck's novel, starting with his angry response to a truck driver's curiosity and ending as he stands in front of the Joad house, abandoned in the wake of the great dust storms of the Depression years in Oklahoma. John Huston was careful to preserve the opening scenes in his film version, recognizing the effectiveness of the quick establishment of Tom's hot temper (which got him a prison term in the first place and will later put him in jeopardy because he has violated his parole by moving to California) and the dramatic power of the rude reintroduction to freedom that awaits him at home. The opening seems to have made an impression on Flannery O'Connor, whether as novel or film, for in the first

chapter of *Wise Blood* she translates Steinbeck's situation into terms suitable for her extended study in alienation and self-destruction. And when John Huston directed the film version of O'Connor's novel, he faithfully reproduced that derived beginning, once again as a key to the story that will follow.

Hazel Motes is not returning home from prison but from a tour of duty in the U.S. Army during the Second World War, yet the two are similar experiences, being regimented and repressive ordeals. Like Tom, Hazel returns to find the homeplace abandoned, with only a chiffarobe remaining, which he famously claims for his own in a hostile, paranoid note. In a later scene he confronts a hapless woman on the train to Augusta, denouncing her lack of true faith, evoking Tom Joad's confrontation with the truck driver, although in quite different terms. Tom's anger is a reflection of his pride, the trucker's curiosity inspiring an outburst revealing a sensitivity about his status as an ex-convict, delivered as a veiled threat. Hazel's response is inspired by no similar inquiry, but comes like a bolt of lightning out of the blue, suggesting his mental imbalance and revealing his fanatic, perverse religious errand.

Aside from his defensiveness, Tom seems relatively unmarked by his prison experience, which chiefly serves as an interval that removed him from the disasters of the dustbowl, making his reentry all the more shocking. Hazel, however, has been seriously wounded in battle, and like so many returning veterans is carrying a psychological scar as well, as evidenced by his obsessive resolve to set himself up as an evangelist, crusading for a Christian church without Christ. Tom, by contrast, has a rational, utilitarian sensibility, perhaps a key to his survival in prison, which makes him the driving force and organizational center of his family's journey west to California. The family having voted to leave barren Oklahoma for the orange groves, Tom quickly takes charge of the journey, and his mother clearly recognizes his superiority as a leader.

Like Steinbeck himself, Tom Joad is a man without a religion, and the former evangelist, Jim Casy, who accompanies Tom on the last stage of his return home, has abandoned his former calling because he regards himself as an important vessel of the Christian spirit. Accompanying the Joad family west, Casy undergoes a transformational pilgrimage, finding fulfillment in the notion of brotherhood promoted by the

Wobbly movement. He becomes a secular, even socialistic, Christ, whose martyrdom at the hands of a brutal mob serves to convert Tom himself to the movement. Tom's famous parting speech to Ma Joad echoes the phrasing of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," the song that Steinbeck regarded as expressing the purpose of his novel, which dramatizes the rising anger of the dispossessed. In short, Steinbeck's novel ends with a conversion equivalent to that which Hazel has experienced prior to the start of *Wise Blood*, stated in secular not spiritual terms, yet with the same revolutionary implication. Notably, Tom's new religion is also a church without Christ.

By contrast, Hazel Motes's newly minted faith has no obvious social implications. Yet it is an expression of a deep-seated alienation from contemporary life, a defiant gesture in the face of smug, middle-class, Protestant America. A version of fundamentalism gone awry, Hazel's "religion" may be regarded as in the Antinomian tradition, though O'Connor's book is chiefly an expression of a post-WW II malaise, the chief philosophical flower of which was Existentialism. Steinbeck also expresses hostility against conventional, middle-class society, which reacts in fear and anger to the masses of unemployed in California, but his angry protest retains a considerable measure of prewar optimism, identified with Roosevelt's New Deal strategies, which drew on socialistic formulas without abandoning the nation's democratic, capitalistic basis. Steinbeck's uneasiness about communistic solutions to social problems is well-known, and he was surprised to find his book attacked as sympathetic to radicalism. Thanks to the Cold War, after 1945 the American hostility to communism would harden, and Steinbeck would find himself in the uncomfortable position of defending the U.S. presence in Vietnam.

Although her book was published during the McCarthy era, O'Connor had little apparent interest in political problems. Rather, as a Roman Catholic she seems in *Wise Blood* to be displaying the sectarian mischief that protestant fundamentalism encouraged. Despite her declaration that Hazel Motes is an extended demonstration that we cannot escape the Christ lurking within us, the shadowy figure that inhabits his inner landscape, Hazel seems an expression of an extremely unchristian spirit, keyed by his rejection of those who ask for his love. Like Jim Casy, he suffers a kind of martyrdom but no one is converted to his crazy cause as a result. Rather, his death demonstrates his complete alienation

from society, in contrast to Jim Casy's death, which is a signature of his commitment to the cause of organized labor.

Despite Steinbeck's personal lack of interest in institutional religion, in Jim Casy he asserted the implicit connection between radical Protestantism—as evangelical fundamentalism—and radical political change. Starting with De Tocqueville, commentators on the American scene noted the vital role of religion in our public life, and although we now can associate Protestant fundamentalism with political reaction, the growth of radicalism in the United States cannot be separated from its pietistic roots. Both refer back to the sanctity of the individual, whose right to determine his or her own salvation springs from an essentially democratic spirit, traceable to the institutions established by the Puritans. Steinbeck reverses this emphasis, for Casy finds salvation by identifying himself with the needs of a great mass of discontented people, a version of transcendental-

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ism in which the individual gains personal power by merging with a higher state of being. That is, Casy finds a new identity by losing his old one in his vision of a communal self, another distinctly American theme that we can trace back to Whitman's great poem.

Steinbeck uses Tom Joad's return from prison as a device emphasizing the alienation through dispossession of a great number of American farmers. The deserted, ramshackle Joad house is a mute witness to the impersonal, callous nature of American capitalism, which places profits over the well-being of hard-working tillers of the soil. At first identified with his family, Tom's progress thenceforth is deeper and deeper into the communal American soul, the larger family with which he becomes identified as his own disintegrates. By contrast, Hazel's progress is deeper and deeper into himself, the solipsistic passage that critics of radical Protestantism see as ultimately futile, a diagram of self-isolation through an insistence on pure piety early on demonstrated by Roger Williams. Thus, O'Connor brings Hazel back to a ruined homestead so as to cut him loose from family ties: his only remaining connection with his birthright is the fragmentary memory of his grandfather, a rigidly fundamentalist preacher, whose spirit he revives but resolutely places outside any conven-

tional ecclesiastical boundaries. At the end of Steinbeck's novel, Tom is apotheosized as a secular evangelist, literally a man of the people; at the end of O'Connor's novel, Hazel dies a wretched, lonely death, his self-imposed blindness, like that of Oedipus and Gloucester, a signature of his failure to see the truth.

These similarities and differences may not be coincidental. Writing as a Roman Catholic, O'Connor seems to have seen the connection in Steinbeck's great novel between fundamentalism and radical action. She responded with an antithetic text, one that dramatizes the inevitable alienation and self-destruction attending a departure from the authority of mother church. The possible Steinbeck connection aside, what is most puzzling about O'Connor's work from a conventionally religious point of view is the absence of any representative of ecclesiastical authority, whose offices would seem to be essential to the Roman Catholic scheme of salvation. Whatever the quality and nature of her religious convictions, O'Connor—the nun of Milledgeville—restrained herself from mounting a conventional Catholic parable. Instead, she limited her text to an attack on antinomianism—anathema—positing a world in which the very lack of Catholic (or any) clergy guarantees spiritual destruction.

In Steinbeck's book, however, the persistent presence of Protestant fundamentalism with its earnest, self-invested, self-denying evangelistic zeal (distinguished from the bigotry of conventional sectarianism that Ma Joad encounters in the government camp) holds out hope for society's salvation. The two texts are well worth comparison, if only because *The Grapes of Wrath* reveals the desperate hopes of the New Deal's response to the Great Depression, whereas *Wise Blood* confronts the bleakness of the postwar years, in which the greatest spiritual threat was not international Communism, but the empty vistas of Existentialism, which counseled the acceptance of death within an entirely secular frame. Not only was there no pie in the sky by and by, there was no sky, invisible to the eyes of such as Hazel Motes, whose gaze is always earthbound.

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