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Detached Laughter in the South

"I have found that any fiction that comes out of the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader-unless it is grotesque, in which case it's going to be called realism,"¹ declared Flannery O'Connor, who also asserted that "The woods are full of regional writers and it is the great horror of every serious southern writer that he will become one."² Thus, in her wry way, she marked off a body of writing uniquely associated with the southeastern United States, asserted that it had differences deeper than the local-color qualities of a section of the nation, and expressed her stubborn pride in those differences.

The average reasonably well-informed northern reader may want to debate O'Connor's definition of realism, but he will certainly agree that southern writing in this century has been different. Even if he shares the arch provincialism of New York City that has led Richard Gilman to say, "The time is long past when southern writers were either at the center of American literature or powerful influences on the flank,"³ when you say "southern writing" to this

¹Flannery O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," in *The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Melvin J. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson (New York: Fordham University Press, 1966), p. 273.

²Flannery O'Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," in *The Living Novel: A Symposium*, ed. Granville Hicks (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 160.

³Review of *The Surface of Earth*, by Reynolds Price, in *New York Times Book Review*, June 29, 1975, p. 1.

average northern reader, he thinks he knows what to expect. It is the Gothic, revelling deliciously and lasciviously in its horrors. It is the historical, restoring past glories now gone with the wind. It is the idealized and the sentimental, so sickly sweet that he feels as though he had swallowed *Love Story* at one gulp. It is the grotesque, depraved, and deformed. Occasionally, too, it is the indignant and the socially aware. But this northern reader seldom gets from the words "southern writing" a picture that has a substantial comic dimension. This is surprising, because for the last hundred and fifty years the comic has been a major, though often ignored, segment of the southern literary imagination.

O'Connor has other surprises for this northern reader. While acknowledging the label of "grotesque" for her characters, she disavows its applicability and asserts a realistic intention. And if her northern reader means "grotesque"—a southern characteristic which he does recognize and expect—in the currently fashionable sense of the term, he is likely to see it as "an outgrowth of contemporary interest in the irrational, distrust of any cosmic order, frustration at man's lot in the universe,"⁴ an element of "black humor," when it is comic, a form of distortion whose purpose is expressionistic, not representative. If O'Connor is correct, what he sees as grotesque and expressionistic in southern writing is something quite different.

To understand that difference, it is necessary here, as it is with many things southern, to go back for a moment into the past. To a degree unthinkable for any other section of a nation with a history as short as that of the United States, the South has preserved and cherished its temporal continuities. In a time of discontinuities, the South has revered tradition and community. In a world that, by and large, pants passionately after the new and the untried, the South has adapted the received and the known to the needs of the present and the future. Nowhere is this essentially conservative attitude more clearly expressed than in its literature, where it reveres history, gothicism, sentimentality, and formalist criticism—the primary modes of its writers in the nineteenth century. That this traditionalism is also true of its comic writing should be no surprise, for the irreverent but conservative muse of comedy is the muse of

⁴ C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 3rd ed. (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1972), p. 246.

limitations, of restraints, of tradition, the portrayer of human limitations and frailties rather than superhuman aspirations and ideals—at least so it has often been, and so it is in the American South. To look at humor in the recent South, it is necessary to see it as a continuation of traditional comic writing in the region, even though the South has frequently been viewed as an arena exclusively dedicated to tragedy or cruel exploitation or sickeningly pious sentiment. What has comedy, committed as she is to mocking the discrepancies between appearance and reality, to do with so self-deluding a region as the South? Such a view is peculiarly unhistorical, for few would deny the ribald life and triumphant vigor of that group of nineteenth-century writers whom we call the humorists of the Old Southwest and only those whose sense of history is too weak to instruct them in the chronological course of the westward-moving frontier in the early nineteenth century will fail to see that that flood of writing was produced in Georgia, Mississippi, and Alabama—in what was the southwestern frontier before the Civil War. Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes* (1835) is the comic portrayal of a backwoods culture in Georgia. Joseph Glover Baldwin's *Flush Times of Alabama and Mississippi* (1853) is an amusing record of the rascality, ignorance, and depravity of life on that wild and roaring frontier. Johnson Jones Hooper's *Some Adventures of Captain Simon Suggs* (1845) follows a rascal's wild, picaresque adventures on that frontier. George Washington Harris's sketches about Sut Lovingood, an exuberant and uninhibited denizen of Tennessee were collected as *Sut Lovingood Yarns* (1867). And there are many others, most notably Thomas Bangs Thorpe, whose *Big Bear of Arkansas* is almost the archetype of a brand of humor resting upon dialect and tall tale and comic character. It was a rich strain of earthy humor which these writers—mostly lawyers, politicians and journalists—produced as an avocation on the Old South: western frontier.⁵

These early southern humorists have a number of common characteristics. The writer, either in his own person or through a narrative persona, usually belongs to a social class quite different from and superior to that of the frontier wild life which he describes. He

⁵A fine representative collection of these humorists, with a perceptive introduction, is *Humor of the Old Southwest*, ed. Hennig Cohen and William B. Dillingham (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964; reprinted, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976).

remains consistently the outsider and the observer who brings to bear upon the subjects of his portrayal a set of standards, a level of culture, and a facility with language quite out of keeping with the subjects being described. Each narrator depends upon this social and cultural distance to make possible the representation of crudities, cruelties, and depravities that would otherwise have been almost unbearably shocking to the reader to whom the work is addressed. The mode in which these writers worked was neither Gothic nor sentimental; it was detached, cool, amused, generally tolerant, and often sardonic. They reported to a society back home on what was happening on the wild frontier, but these reports became historical only after the westward movement had passed and had left them as its records. The primary method which these writers employed was the realistic portrayal of an extravagant and wild life, done with great exuberance and a peculiar delight in the vitality and the strangeness of idiomatic speech on the Old Southwestern frontier. Tall tales were one of the hallmarks of this kind of humor, and folk heroes like Davy Crockett and Mike Fink paraded their might across the pages of these books. The primary method, however, was literal reporting of the strange and wonderful doings of the natives, colored by a certain amount of amused extravagance, in reports sent back to an urbane and civilized society.

This was not the only form of humor in the South during the nineteenth century. George Bagby wrote wittily and comically in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, and others imitated the quiet wit of the English periodical essays. Nevertheless, the uniquely southern form of humor dealt with this frontier. Humor was relied on to make the portrayal of this coarse, rough life palatable and enjoyable, rather than horrifying and sickening, for it could easily have been a subject for Gothic treatment. For example, William Gilmore Simms worked essentially in the Gothic tradition in many of his novels. In 1835 and 1836, in his attempts to portray the Loyalist forces during the American Revolution, he piled up the terrors to which they were submitted by their Whig adversaries and the horrors which they later perpetrated in revenge, making themselves into creatures of terror, drinkers of blood, frightening outlaws. However, by the middle 1850's Simms had virtually abandoned the Gothic approach. In his last two Revolutionary novels, *The Forayers* (1855) and *Eutuw* (1856) he shifted to the comic portrayal of these depraved people,

creating a great host of far from lovable but certainly laughable and impressive rascals and ruffians who represented the Tory forces. For him, comedy became an effective medium for downgrading the seriousness of hated causes and for attacking the character of those he disliked.⁶

In this century, the South has produced two kinds of humor not greatly different from those of Bagby and the Old Southwest humorists. The humor practiced by James Branch Cabell and Ellen Glasgow in Virginia and by Robert Molloy and Josephine Pinckney around Charleston is essentially that of the novel of manners or of urbane fantasy. Charming and witty, it exists only because the Virginia Tidewater and the Carolina Low Country still had a code of manners sufficiently firm to enable the comedy of manners to be constructed around it. Perhaps the finest writing in this tradition done by any Southerner was by Ellen Glasgow in her Queenborough trilogy, *The Romantic Comedians* (1926), *They Stooped to Folly* (1929), and *The Sheltered Life* (1932).⁷

Opposed to this kind of polished and witty humor, there has also existed a raucous, ribald, and extravagant humor which is the realist's way of dealing with the unbearable or intolerable aspects of life without shifting into the tradition of the Gothic or the tragic. It is a kind of humor that depends, as had that of the Old Southwest, upon the difference in social class and learning between the putative narrator and the subject. It has its roots in aspects of the social condition which constitute affronts to human dignity and arouse the deepest and most penetrating anger, or in cosmic conditions that dwarf and stunt human beings. It controls and shapes these affronts this anger, or this vision by establishing a redeeming comic distance:

To attempt to deal with the humor of William Faulkner is a task for a book, not for a section of an essay, so I shall use him not as a subject for analysis, but as an object to point to before going on to my two representative writers. William Faulkner can be considered the "compleat" southern writer, for he has demonstrated with a high degree of artistry and accomplishment almost every mode of south-

⁶See C. Hugh Holman, "Simms's Changing View of Loyalists during the Revolution," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 29 (Fall, 1976), 501-513.

⁷These novels are dealt with as comedies of manners in C. Hugh Holman, "April in Queenborough: Ellen Glasgow's Comedies of Manners," *Sewanee Review*, 82 (Spring, 1974), 263-283, reprinted with annotations in *Ellen Glasgow: Centennial Essays*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1976), pp.

ern fiction which exists in this century. He dealt with Gothic horrors and extravagances in *Sanctuary* (1931). He carried the historical novel to its highest limits of artistic success in *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). He made art out of the idealized and sentimentalized view of the Civil War in *The Unvanquished* (1938). He dealt with the peculiar mixture of symbolism and naturalism that we associate with the South in *Light in August* (1932) and *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). In the Snopes trilogy—*The Hamlet* (1940), *The Town* (1957) and *The Mansion* (1960)—he carried realistic comedy to its highest accomplishment in this century, working in the tradition of the frontier humorist. Those who call *The Hamlet* the finest comic novel produced by a southern American certainly can feel some confidence in their judgment. It is worth noting that *The Hamlet* is in four parts. Parts I and IV deal with the comic theme of barter, ts II and III deal with the novel's other major theme, love.⁸ Thus the serious elements of the novel are enclosed by the comic. This use of the comic tone to restore an equitable world is not unusual for Faulkner the opening and concluding chapters of *Light in August*, dealing with Lena Grove, serve a similar although more restricted function setting the tragic horrors of the main portion of that novel in a perspective against a comic pastoral.⁹ But the Snopes trilogy is loaded with scenes of extravagant humor. The Snopeses themselves are thoroughly in keeping with the natives of the Old Southwestern frontier of Longstreet and Baldwin, and there may be a close relationship between Flem Snopes, the leader of the Snopes clan, and Johnson Jones Hooper's Simon Suggs. The Snopeses represent the lowest class. They swarm over the land, almost seeming to crawl from under stones and rotten logs, and gradually take possession of it. Under the coldly acquisitive leadership of Flem Snopes, they move from the small country community of Frenchman's Bend into the town, and finally to the triumphant possession of the once-

⁸See Melvin Beckman, *Faulkner: The Major Years* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 139-159, for an excellent, succinct treatment of the structure and themes of *The Hamlet*. See Olga W. Vickery, *The Novels of William Faulkner*, rev. ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp. 167-208, for an examination of the themes of love (or sex) and money in the Snopes trilogy. See Warren Beck, *Man in Motion: Faulkner's Trilogy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), for a most detailed (but perhaps overly solemn) treatment of the trilogy.

⁹For an explication of the functional role of the Lena Grove story, see C. Hugh Holman, "The Unity of Faulkner's *Light in August*," in his *The Roots of Southern Writing: Essays on the Literature of the American South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1972), pp. 149-167. The essay was first published in *PMLA*, 72 (Mar., 1957), 155-166.

glorious South. *The Hamlet* is a loosely linked series of episodes about the Snopeses and their way of life, breaking into separate episodes. Some of those, first published as short stories and episodes in other of the Yoknapatawpha novels, represent an almost pure survival of the characters, actions, and mode of Old Southwestern humor, even being recounted by a narrator, V. K. Ratliff from a position of superior knowledge. One such is the story of how Ab Snopes was bested by Pat Stamper, a horse-swap story of a sort that goes back to Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*.¹⁰ Perhaps the funniest story that Faulkner ever wrote, "Spotted Horses," appears as an episode in *The Hamlet*. It recounts the events that befell Frenchman's Bend when Flem Snopes brought in a band of wild untamable Texas horses and sold them to the men of the community.¹¹ That novel closes with a tale of "salting" treasure in the old Frenchman I place in Flem's efforts to sell it to Ratliff. In *The Mansion*, a novel generally quite inferior to *The Hamlet*, there are redeeming pieces of comic delight, such as the episode when Byron Snopes sends his four wild and uncivilized children to visit kinsmen in Jefferson. They almost burn Clarence Snopes at the stake. In another incident Clarence, running for Congress, is making a speech; Ratliff has two boys brush Snopes's trousers with branches saturated with dog urine, so the dogs line up to lift their legs on his trousers while he is speaking. Clarence is eliminated from the race on the grounds that the district shouldn't be represented by a man whom every "dog that happens by can't tell from a fence post." In *The Hamlet* there is the tall tale of Flem Snopes outwitting the Devil in Hell and gaining ownership of the infernal regions.

Faulkner uses these episodes and many others like them to fashion a picture of his mythical county, firmly embedded in specific people and actions and described with great intensity. Throughout this picture of what the South had fallen to and of those who controlled it in the years between 1865 and 1915, Faulkner used humor because it allowed him to describe these people and their way of life without treating them either with the Gothic horrors which they might have

¹⁰William Faulkner, *The Hamlet* (New York Random House 1940) pp. 28-53. This episode was originally published as "Fool about a Horse," *Scribner's*, 100 (August, 1936), 80-86.

¹¹Faulkner, *The Hamlet*, pp. 309-367. This episode was originally published as "Spotted Horses," *Scribner's*, 89 (June, 1931), 585-597. The story is substantially revised and greatly expanded in the novel.

inspired, or with the sentimental sympathy which we might have had for them had they been presented as the culturally deprived. Neither Faulkner nor his reader regards most characters in the Snopes trilogy as on his own cultural level. The things which happen to them are seen as comic, rather than terrifying. Humor was among the major means by which Faulkner described his world and set it apart from the mainstream, while not denying its actuality. When Faulkner loses the distance which allows him to look without involvement at these characters (as happens in *The Mansion*), when he begins to move in close and understand Flem Snopes, and when he begins to follow Mink Snopes's determination to leave prison and seek revenge upon Flem with some admiration for his determination and persistence—at this point the comedy begins to weaken, and the trilogy begins to weaken as well. There is in Faulkner's Snopes trilogy vastly more than a mere redoing of the humor of the Old Southwest, but that kind of humor is one significant and very happy element in the novels. Faulkner could be—and, at his best, was—truly a master of the comic mode of story-telling. He used that mode to permit the realistic portrayal of characters and actions that might otherwise have overwhelmed us with their crudeness or their horror, as a means of achieving distance, perspective, and the redemption of detachment.

Certainly this treatment of Faulkner's Snopes trilogy is very incomplete, but I hope it suggests to those familiar with his work that Faulkner sometimes consciously wrote in the generally detached mode of the humorists of the Old Southwest frontier, the detached mode which I am maintaining is the most typical method of the writers of humor in the South. Such distance is always bought with a price and for a purpose. In Faulkner's case, the price is the lowering of his dark, tragic intensity; the purpose is the presentation of frail or ignorant or even rapacious people without converting them into devils. For example, in *Absalom, Absalom!* Thomas Sutpen looms vast and demonic over a blasted and monumental landscape, in large part because we see him through the eyes of those who are deeply involved with his tragic and demonic implications. Had V. K. told the Sutpen story, Sutpen would have been greatly scaled down from his superhuman magnitude, and Wash Jones, who kills him with a scythe, would have appeared not as a fated Fury wielding the

knife of time, but as a shambling poor white with a rusty blade. Comedy is the right mode for the realistic portrayal of people seen in terms of their weaknesses and limitations, particularly if one wants to portray their twisted selves without converting them into creatures of horror.

Now I wish to deal with two other southern writers who belong to this tradition of detached comedy, Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor. Both have produced distinctively humorous bodies of material, though in the minds of many readers neither should be thought of as a comic writer. In addition, the differences in their visions of the world are so great that, at first glance, they seem to share nothing except a landscape and a tendency to draw grotesque characters. Erskine Caldwell was overcome with the evil which grew out of the economic and agricultural deprivations associated with the South in which he grew up. Flannery O'Connor writes of the poor whites and the middle class in middle Georgia and Tennessee, the same people with whom Caldwell deals. But, being a profoundly religious person, she sees them under the light of eternity, and is deeply concerned with the spiritual deprivations which they suffer because of their unsatisfied hunger for God.

Perhaps the principal inheritor and, to some extent, exploiter of the frontier tradition in southern literature is Erskine Caldwell, whose world is largely populated by people who would have been thoroughly familiar to Johnson Jones Hooper, George Washington Harris, and Augustus Baldwin Longstreet. Indeed, since most of Caldwell's best work is centered in and around Augusta, Georgia, the locale of Longstreet's *Georgia Scenes*, to set Caldwell's portrayal against Longstreet's is to see what has happened to the same kinds of people under the impact of economic poverty, spiritual decay, and the collapse of the agricultural system. If Longstreet's Georgia denizens possessed an enormous zest and vigor, there are about the inhabitants of *Tobacco Road*, *God's Little Acre*, and *Trouble in July* a debilitation and weakness in which only hunger and sex remain forces that inspire any vigorous action. In this drab world, repetition becomes the dominant tone. Characters endlessly repeat the same actions—an aspect of *Tobacco Road*, for example, which the stage version caught very well by an almost stylized reiteration of characters and actions. These people are portrayed at

the most elementary level, reduced to the level and the actions of animals. Social decorum is totally removed; public and private are interchangeable, and stimulus and response are automatic.

But Caldwell, in presenting these characters, differs significantly from the kind of exuberant extravagance which had characterized the Old Southwestern humorists. Where they had sought unusual and spectacular events, he uses seemingly endless repetition. Where they had used an extravagant style, capitalizing upon the rhetorical excessiveness of southern speech and action, he uses a plain, powerful, and direct style. Where they had portrayed the positive actions of their characters, Caldwell's people exist in the mental state of refusal. As Kenneth Burke pointed out in a brilliant essay, Caldwell "puts people into complex social situations while making them act with the scant, crude, tropisms of an insect."¹² Certainly Caldwell's characters should precipitate in the reader a sense of horror and shock, a revulsion at the skill with which he exploits their animal nature. Yet it is actually difficult to read about characters in wildly incongruous situations and stripped to the animal level without finding them ludicrous and ridiculous, rather than terrifying. It has been customary to think of Caldwell as having produced, in the early 1930's, a few important novels—*Tobacco Road*, *God's Little Acre*, *Journeyman*, and *Trouble in July*—and a group of short stories of great distinction, including "Kneel to the Rising Sun" and "Country Full of Swedes," and then having passed into a period of hack work and conscious pornography which renders him no longer a serious figure. Probably this view will be corrected with the passage of time, as James Korges has asserted with great vigor in *Erskine Caldwell*. Whether Korges is correct or not, it is true that the comic strain present in the early novels is still very active in the ones Caldwell has written since the early 1950's, a number of which compare very favorably with his earlier works. Perhaps his funniest novel is *God's Little Acre* (1933), possibly his best is *Trouble in July* (1940), and *Georgia Boy* (1943) is his best nostalgic picture of childhood. But *Claudelle Inglis* (1968) is an almost flawless sexual comedy with the skill of story-telling and the exuberance of a

¹² Kenneth Burke, "Caldwell: Maker of Grotesques," *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 2nd ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967), p. 354.

¹³ James Korges, *Erskine Caldwell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), pp. 5-8.

Chaucerian fabliau; *Miss Mama Aimee* (1967) is possibly his best novel since *Georgia Boy*; and *Summertime Island* (1968) is a treatment of a boy's initiation only slightly less important than his best work.

Miss Mama Aimee is based upon a whole series of comic reversals and contains some marvelous characters. The preacher Raley Purdy, when he sees a girl unclothed, worries about what Billy Graham would think if he saw him in such a situation. The girl asks, "Who's Billy Graham?" and Purdy replies, "I can't talk about Billy Graham when you're stark naked—he wouldn't want me to." ¹⁴

At the heart of Caldwell's portrayal of his world is a sense of what the social system can do—indeed, has done—to people, and upon that basis he makes his strongest claims. In his autobiography Caldwell says of *Tobacco Road*, "I felt that I would never be able to write successfully about other people in other places until first I had written the story of the landless and poverty-stricken families living on East Georgia sand hills and tobacco roads. . . . I wanted to tell the story of the people I knew in the manner in which they actually lived their lives . . . and to tell it without regard for fashions in writing and traditional plots." ¹⁵ In that novel, which contained the essence of most of what he was to do best, Caldwell wrote with great simplicity and force, his clear, hard, clean, and forceful prose describing people whose lives are so stripped of economic and social hope that they become grotesque parodies of human beings; twisted by the simplest hungers, they are totally lacking in dignity and integrity. "All I wanted to do," Caldwell said, "was simply to describe to the best of my ability the aspirations and despair of the people I wrote about." ¹⁶

Caldwell's people are twisted by social and economic deprivation, by the exhausting of the soil, by a cruel tenant-farmer system, by the absence of the most elementary aspects of culture. *Tobacco Road* and its environment is a soil depleted, a people washed out and drained and responding like animals to the forces around them. Yet Caldwell seems to be saying, "Fertilize the soil, return the price of cotton to a subsistence level, give them opportunity, and hope will follow, and in another generation something like the good life may

¹⁴Erskine Caldwell, *Miss Mama Aimee* (New York: New American Library, 1967), p. 79.

¹⁵Erskine Caldwell, *Call It Experience* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1951) p. 101, ¹⁶*Ibid.* p. 132.

return." The system is wrong but remediable. Hence he can feel a social anger, and he can portray, through telling reductions to the animal level, the character and quality of life in this kind of world. But he knows that these characters, however misshaped, are people and on them he lavishes much of his warmest attention. "It seemed to me that the most authentic and enduring materials of fiction were the people themselves,"¹⁷ he said. To represent such people one must deal with them realistically on one level, and yet without contempt, while describing the system which makes them what they are. This is a difficult strategy, and one for which Caldwell successfully adapted the methods of the comic.

The world these people inhabit is one of cruel limitations and deprivations. To portray the products of such deprivation as monsters would be to misrepresent their human qualities, but to portray them as other than distorted and grotesque would be to ignore the effects of a cruel economic system. Comedy is the obvious answer for it is the mode of limitations, the mode of hope. Above all, comedy gives the distance between reader and subject that allows grotesqueries to be seen with objectivity.

In recent years the southern writer most frequently discussed as a creator of grotesques has been Flannery O' Connor. A great deal of attention has been given to her portraits of poor whites in middle Georgia and Tennessee, and the key to her comic mode has often been sought. Although she is solidly in the tradition of southern detached humor, there is a crucial difference between her and most of her fellow southern writers, past and present, a difference which accounts for the special quality of her comedy. She was a Catholic writer in a Protestant world, and she saw the writing of fiction as a Christian vocation: "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in relation to that."¹⁸ What gives distance and comic perspective to her view of the world is fundamentally a religious distancing, resulting from her confidence of her own salvation in a world of those futilely seeking surety. As St. Augustine said, "Our souls are restless till they find rest in Thee." The world she portrays is made up of such restless, seeking souls, primitive in mind, Protestant in religion, sharing a

¹⁷Ibid, pp. 101-102.

¹⁸Flannery O' Connor, "The Fiction Writer and His Country," pp.

deep common and personal awareness of the awful and the awesome presence and power of God in the world. It is a power and a presence which they can recognize, but which they do not accept. Living in a world not ordered to an adequate sense of this power and presence of God, these characters become grotesque and unnatural when they seek to deny Him or to pervert their hunger for Him. From the perspective of one who has found peace and rests secure in the knowledge of herself, O'Connor can look out with a kind of amused pity upon a world that is still troubled and, though it knows it not, seeking salvation from its godlessness.

Though this perspective is religious and philosophical, in its aesthetic effect it is not greatly different from the distance of class or political position or economic status which has been, for a hundred and fifty years, essential to the kind of realistic humor fundamental to the South. And this assurance of hers, this sense that the ultimate reality transcends the physical world which she portrays with directness and hard clarity, makes all that happens within that world important only in what can come after it. Hence there occur repeatedly in her work those moments when not merely the humiliation of the flesh but the destruction of physical life proves to be an open door to a spiritual victory. People die with grace given them in their moments of expiration, as though death were, to the author, a triumph.

This perspective gives her an enormous freedom, which she consciously exercises as a comic writer. Of her novel *Wise Blood* she said, "The book was written with zest and, if possible, it should be read that way. It is a comic novel about the Christian *malgre lui*, and as such, very serious, for all comic novels that are any good must be about matters of life and death."¹⁹ This kind of comedy, in one sense close to that which gives its title to Dante's great work, is a function of a tone which finds its basis in the author's own religious security, as Martha Stephens has persuasively pointed out.²⁰

In the world of her fiction, Flannery O'Connor has dealt extensively with tortured, tormented, and distorted people and has treated them with both comic detachment and sympathy. The peculiar mixture of detachment and sympathy which O'Connor achieves

¹⁹Preface to Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, in *Three: Wise Blood A Good Man Is Hard to Find, The Violent Bear It Away* (New York New American Library, 1964), p. 8.

²⁰Martha Stephens, *The Question of Flannery O'Connor* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), pp.

is most unusual in American writing. She herself suggested "Whenever I am asked why southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one. To be able to recognize a freak you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still in the main theological."²¹ These "freaks" are such because they are far from whole.

As a writer of comedy O'Connor is best in the short story, and her most successful efforts here are in such stories as "Good Country People" and "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" in her first volume of short stories. Her method is exemplified very well in "Good Country People." Joy Hopewell, the daughter of a widow Mrs. Hopewell, regards herself as considerably above the simple people whom she sees about her and whom she calls "good country people."

Joy, who changes her name to Hulga to spite her mother and who has an artificial leg (one of her legs was shot off when she was a child), is thirty-two years old, has a Ph.D. in philosophy, a bad heart condition, and is living at home. She is an atheist, and proudly declares that she believes in nothing. A young Bible salesman—clearly from "good country people"—visits them, and Hulga sets out to seduce him into atheism. She leads him to the hayloft in the barn and there discovers that he is far from "good country people." One of his Bibles has been hollowed out and contains a bottle of whiskey, a set of cards with pornographic pictures on the back and a package of contraceptives. He steals her glasses, removes her artificial leg and takes it with him, and leaves her alone in the hayloft without her leg, declaring to her as he leaves, "Hulga you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!"²² The story is both shocking and amusing; its amusement comes from the fact that Hulga has found in the young Bible salesman precisely what she has sought all her life, and it has betrayed her and left her without the means to move or to see.

On one level this story is a parable of the nihilism of atheism but on another it is a comic masterpiece, primarily because of the wry, hard, and sardonic quality of Flannery O'Connor's style. A few

²¹O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," p. 276.

²²"Good Country People," in *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* (New York: Farrar, Straw and Giroux, 1971), p. 291.

examples from the story will illustrate: "Mrs. Hopewell had no bad qualities of her own but she was able to use other people's in such a constructive way that she never felt the lack." ²³ "The large hulking Joy, whose constant outrage had obliterated every expression from her face, would stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue with the look of someone who had achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it." ²⁴ "The girl had taken the Ph.D. in philosophy and this left Mrs. Hopewell at a complete loss. You could say, 'My daughter is a nurse,' or 'My daughter is a school teacher,' or even 'My daughter is a chemical engineer.' You could not say, 'My daughter is a philosopher.'" ²⁵ "As a child she had sometimes been subject to feelings of shame, but education had removed the last traces of that as a good surgeon scrapes for cancer she would no more have felt it over what he was asking than she would have believed in his Bible. But she was as sensitive about the artificial leg as a peacock about his tail." ²⁶

O'Connor is aware of the caste structures that a relatively fixed social order can produce and that have fascinated many other southern writers. For example, in a very late story, "Revelation," she says:

Sometimes Mrs. Turpin occupied herself at night naming the classes of people. On the bottom of the heap were most colored people not the kind she would have been if she had been one, but most of them then next to them-not above, just away from-were the white trash; then above them were the home-owners, and above them the home-and-land owners, to which she and Claud belonged. Above she and Claud were people with a lot of money and much bigger houses and much more land. But here the complexity of it would begin to bear in on her, for some of the people with a lot of money were common and ought to be below she and Claud and some of the people who had good blood had lost their money and had to rent and then there were colored people who owned their homes and land as well. There was a colored dentist in town who had two red Lincolns and a swimming pool and a farm with registered white-face cattle on it.²⁷

These qualities of knowledge, sharp perception, and comic dis-

²³*Ibid.*, p. 272.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 273.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 276.

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 288.

²⁷ "Revelation," in O'Connor's *Complete Stories*, pp.491-492.

tance are mixed in all her work with zest and a stylistic precision so exact as to be almost overwhelming. Her religious attitude and sardonic voice give vivid pictures of her world shaped by her personal angle of vision. In the early stories collected in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*,²⁸ the delight she takes in her "freaks" is greatest, although it is also present in *Wise Blood*,²⁹ a novel and her first published book. But *Wise Blood*, like *The Hamlet* (at least in this respect), was a novel parts of which had originally been written as short stories.³⁰ As O'Connor matured as a writer—she was only twenty years old when she submitted her first published story³¹—her themes deepened and her view of the world, although never losing its comic detachment, took on a more somber quality. In "Everything That Rises Must Converge," first published in 1961,³² her sardonic portrait of Julian, the self-deceiving college graduate, is devastating, but the death of his mother does not have the comic distance which O'Connor had magnificently achieved in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." "Parker's Back," posthumously published,³³ is a hilarious situation, but its theological meaning is impressed with a hand heavier than usual.

In these later stories and in the second novel, *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960), the basic comic method does not change. Although the seriousness of her intention deepens, she does not depart from her accurate portrayal of the literal world. Elizabeth Bishop properly observed of O'Connor's books, "They are clear, hard, vivid, and full of bits of description, phrases, and an odd insight. . . . Critics who accuse her of exaggeration are quite wrong, I think. I lived in Florida for several years next to a flourishing 'Church of God'. . . . After [this] nothing Flannery O'Connor ever wrote could seem at all exaggerated to me."³⁴ I have argued elsewhere that her portrayal of

²⁸Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1955).

²⁹Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Harcourt: Brace, 1952).

³⁰These stories, now available in *The Complete Stories* are "The Train" (*Sewanee Review*, April, 1948), "The Peeler" (*Partisan Review*, December, 1949), "The Heart of the Park" (*Partisan Review*, February, 1949), and "Enoch and the Gorilla" (*New World Writing*, April, 1952).

³¹Flannery O'Connor, "The Geranium," *Accent*, 4 (Summer, 1946), 245-253. It was submitted on February 7, 1946, forty-five days before her twenty-first birthday; see "Notes," *Complete Stories*, p. 55 1.

³²In *New World Writing*, 19 (1961), and reprinted posthumously in *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965).

³³*Esquire*, 63 (April, 1965), 76-78, 151-155; reprinted in *Everything That Rises*.

³⁴Quoted by Robert Giroux in his introduction to *Complete Stories*, pp.

the southern region is accurate,³⁵ and I have asserted that “within two blocks of the Regency Hyatt [in Atlanta] you can find street evangelists extolling their primitive religions in tone and manner that make you think Hazel Motes of *Wise Blood* has come back to life.”³⁶

O’Connor’s succinct, witty, and very direct prose is used with great success in picturing her segment of the South as a microcosm of the human lot. Like Hawthorne, she wanted to produce fiction “that should evolve some deep lesson and should possess physical substance enough to stand alone.”³⁷ Her vision of man was not of a cloud-scraping demigod, a wielder of vast powers, but of a frail, weak creature, imperfect and incomplete in all his parts. To embody such a vision calls for either comedy or pathos, and pathos was alien to Flannery O’Connor’s nature and beliefs.

Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O’Connor were the inheritors of a long southern tradition of detached humor; they employed it on the same kinds of people in many of the same locales, but for radically different purposes. Both sought salvation for the denizens of their worlds. In Caldwell’s case, as Kenneth Burke observed, “In so far as he is moved by the need of salvation, he seems minded to find it in the alignments of political exhortation, by striving mainly to see that we and he take the right side on matters of social justice.”³⁸ Flannery O’Connor, too, was seeking salvation, but the salvation she sought was transcendent, and was to be found only in God. She once said:

The problem for [a southern] novelist will be to know how far he can distort without destroying, and in order not to destroy, he will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work. This descent into himself will, at the same time, be a descent into his region. It will be a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking.³⁹

For both Caldwell and O’Connor, the comic muse worked well, for it

³⁵“Her Rue with a Difference,” in Holman, *Roots of Southern Writing*, pp. 177-186; originally published in Friedman and Lawson, eds., *The Added Dimension* pp. 73-87.

³⁶C. Hugh Holman, “The View from the Regency Hyatt,” in *Roots of Southern Writing*, pp. 96-107; originally published in *Southern Fiction Today: Renaissance and Beyond*, ed. George Core (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1969), pp. 16-32.

³⁷Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Old Manse,” *Mosses from an Old Manse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1883), p. 13.

³⁸Burke, “Caldwell: Master of Grotesques,” p. 352.

³⁹O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature,” 279.

gave them the distance from which to see the world distorted and misshaped by its need to be saved.

To understand how this distancing comedy works, one may have to fall back on Randall Jarrell's judgment that "the best one can do with Mr. Caldwell's peculiar variety of humor is to accept it with gratitude."⁴⁰ But before one does so, it is well to listen to one more caveat from O'Connor:

Even though the writer who produces grotesque fiction may not consider his characters any more freakish than ordinary fallen man usually is, his audience is going to, and it's going to ask him why he has chosen to bring such maimed souls alive. . . . In this country the general reader has managed to connect the grotesque somehow with the sentimental, for whenever he speaks of it favorably, he seems to associate it with the writer's compassion. . . . The kind of hazy compassion demanded of the writer now makes it difficult for him to be anti anything. Certainly when the grotesque is used in a legitimate way, the intellectual and moral judgments in it will have the ascendancy over feeling.⁴¹

Both Erskine Caldwell and Flannery O'Connor knew how to say "No!" in laughter.

⁴⁰As quoted by Carvel Collins in the introduction to *Erskine Caldwell's Men and Women* (Boston: Little Brown, 1961), 7.

⁴¹O'Connor, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Literature," p. 275.