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“No man with a good car needs to be justified”: Preaching
Rock and Roll Salvation from O'Connor's *Wise Blood*
to Ministry's “Jesus Built My Hotrod”

Soon I discovered that this rock thing was true
Jerry Lee Lewis was the devil
Jesus was an architect previous to his career as a prophet
All of a sudden, I found myself in love with the world
So there was only one thing I could do
Was ding a ding dang my dang a long ling long.
(Jourgensen et al., “Jesus Built My Hotrod”)

 Industrial dance band Ministry's 1991 intensely driving dance track “Jesus Built My Hotrod” begins with this spoken word piece, which is followed by several samples of dialogue from John Huston's 1979 film adaptation of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*. The actor Brad Dourif, as roadside preacher Hazel Motes, speaks these famous lines:

Nobody with a good car needs to worry about nothin', do you understand?

Nobody with a good car needs to be justified.

I come a long way since I believed in anything, and I come halfway around the world.

What are you talking about? Where you came from is gone, where you thought you were going to weren't never there, and where you are ain't no good unless you can get away from it.

Ministry is certainly not alone in their admiration and evocation of Flannery O'Connor's first novel: *Wise Blood* holds a particular sway over many of the musicians in rock and roll's extreme genre of punk and its subgenre of industrial music. From Gang of Four's 1983 song “A Man with a Good Car,” to Corrosion of Conformity's 1996 album *Wise Blood*,¹ punk musicians have found the work of Flannery O'Connor—especially *Wise Blood*—as invoking a particularly masculine, aggressive form of rebellion central to the ethos of American rock and roll.

O'Connor once explained in a letter to Andrew Lytle that “There is a moment of grace in most of the stories, a moment where it is offered, and is usually rejected . . . This moment of grace [in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”] excited the devil to frenzy” (4 Feb. 1960, *CW* 1121). Though many have focused on such moments of grace in O'Connor's work, I believe that it is this concomitant excitement of the “devil to frenzy” in *Wise Blood* which has captured the attention of so many who align themselves with the “devil's music,” rock and roll. As the novel's publication coincided with both the development of rock and roll as its own genre (separate from the blues, jazz, and country music from which it evolved)



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as well as the emergent American car culture, O'Connor deftly captures the excitement of the birth of these cultural icons.² Reading *Wise Blood* along with the band Ministry's punk/industrial tribute to the work illuminates the heretofore ignored significance of the novel to the emergence of an aggressive, masculine rock and roll ethos best symbolized by the celebration of the American hotrod in popular music. I maintain that, despite her intentions to create in *Wise Blood* a parable of redemption, O'Connor's vivid portrait of the nihilism at the center of the process of redemption in fact helped to create an iconography for the heathen. In this article, I will trace the influence that O'Connor's novel has had on rock and roll, particularly in its more masculine, aggressive, punk modes.

The novel tells the story of Hazel Motes, who preaches his own unique religious vision of a "Church Without Christ" from the hood of his Essex automobile. It opens with Motes returning to his home in Eastrod, Tennessee, after being wounded and discharged from the army. Finding his home abandoned, he travels to the fictional city of Taulkinham. Motes buys a car and begins evangelizing from its hood, following in the tradition of his grandfather, a circuit preacher who took to the road to spread the Word of God. The description of Motes's grandfather's car reveals that it functions as more than just transportation, more than even a pulpit. Rather, it was a supplemental power source for the force of his message, as he

traveled three counties in a Ford automobile. Every fourth Saturday he had driven into Eastrod as if he were just in time to save them all from Hell, and he was shouting before he had the car door open. People gathered around his Ford because he seemed to dare them to. He would climb up on the nose of it and preach from there and sometimes he would climb onto the top of it and shout down at them. (CW10)

The power of the automobile is one which goes beyond mere horsepower. Rather, Motes's inherited project of the traveling preacher exemplifies the three primary patterns of American masculinity identified by Michael Kimmel in *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*: "American men try to *control themselves*; they project their fears onto *others*; and



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when feeling too pressured, they attempt an *escape*" (emphasis in original, 6). According to Kimmel, "One must be completely self-controlled, since in . . . democracy there was no one else to look to for such control. Society was chock-full of equals—which is another way of saying it was full of *competition*. Two choices seemed possible: Stay and compete, or try to escape" (32).

The vocation of circuit preacher, especially as Motes understands it, exemplifies Kimmel's observed patterns of American masculinity. In fact, Motes's project seems to mirror Kimmel's chronological schema in reverse. He starts with escape: first from the war, then on the train, and then (of course) in his automobile. Even in his own car, however, he cannot escape his religion-based fears. Driving away from the car lot, he encounters a boulder on the side of the road with the painted warning, "WOE TO THE BLASPHEMER AND WHOREMONGER! WILL HELL SWALLOW YOU UP?" (*CW* 42). From there, he projects his own fears onto others through his evangelizing, as his Jesus is not one whom he embraces; rather, the Jesus that he has inherited is one to fear. When Motes's grandfather would preach, he would use Motes as an example of the relentlessness of Christ:

Did they know that even for that boy there, for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides, Jesus would die ten millions deaths before He would let him lose his soul? He would chase him over the waters of sin! Did they doubt Jesus could walk on the waters of sin? That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed . . . Jesus would have him in the end! (11)

Not a nurturing, pastoral Jesus, the Jesus that Motes has inherited is one to be feared, one who will "have him in the end!"³ Belief is a seemingly inescapable trap for Motes, one which he fervently tries to deny and escape.

Unable to escape, Motes tries to project this fear onto others through his own ministry, in his attempts to gain followers in his flight from this relentless Jesus:

Maybe you think you're not clean because you don't believe. Well you are clean, let me tell you that. Every one of you people are clean and let me tell you why if you think it's because of Jesus Christ Crucified you're wrong. I don't say he wasn't crucified but I say it wasn't for you." . . . "I don't need Jesus," Haze said. "What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts. (CW 30-31)

Despite his protests to the contrary, however, Motes's behavior reflects an attempt to emulate his understanding of this predatory Jesus—not to evade or repudiate it. As Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., observes, "Haze strives to imitate his [Jesus'] powerful injuring capability, delivering both verbal and physical abuse to just about everyone he meets" (86). And finally, when these strategies fail to provide him peace, Motes ramps up his projects of self-discipline and self-sacrifice to acts of self-mortification which severely threaten his well-being, health, and even life. By the novel's end, he has gone beyond even wearing barbed wire beneath his clothing and blinding himself in the name of his nihilistic vision, to lengths of endangerment which ultimately kill him.

According to O'Connor, it is not until Motes goes to these extreme lengths that he "come[s] into his absolute integrity"; in a letter to Carl Hartman, she explains "that complete nihilism has led him the long way (or maybe it's really the short way) around to the Redemption again" (2 Mar. 1954, CW 920). I believe, however, that O'Connor's depiction of such nihilism is so vivid that many miss the message of Redemption completely. It is telling that in her *A Prayer Journal*, O'Connor writes that, "Hell seems a great deal more feasible to my weak mind than heaven. No doubt because hell is a more earthly-seeming thing. I can fancy the tortures of the damned but I cannot imagine the disembodied souls hanging in a crystal for all eternity praising God" (6). I believe that it is the vividness of Motes's nihilistic vision for so much of the novel that has inspired so many punk musicians who share this nihilistic vision. For this reason, I propose that *Wise Blood* should be considered as a foundational, germinal text for the rebellion of American rock and roll, particularly in its more masculine, punk-inspiring genealogy.

In *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press point to Jack Kerouac's 1957 *On the Road* as "arguably the seminal text for rock rebellion" as it "propounds a very gender-specific quest for self-discovery" (8)—a quest in which the automobile is central. *Esquire* writer Scott Raab similarly describes what he calls the "Kerouacian Zen of eternal Go" in his discussion of the strong emotional bonds which American men feel for their cars (52). Certainly, both *On the Road* and *Wise Blood* have male protagonists who look to the automobile for self-expression and escape, and they both exhibit what Brian Abel Ragen observes in his study of the automobile in O'Connor's work, the use of the automobile "as an image of complete personal freedom—freedom from the past, freedom from responsibility, freedom even from God. This association is not at all inappropriate: freedom of some kind is certainly what the car means to many Americans" (55). Indeed, *On the Road* exemplifies the ways in which ". . . the myth of the frontier lives on in our automobiles" (Ragen 56). Ragen connects the automobile to "the literary tradition that grows out of the memory of the frontier," and he observes that "The tradition of the American Adam [R. W. B. Lewis's term] is the same one Leslie Fiedler sees in the history of the American Novel: men running from women and society" (56). *On the Road* looms large in the rock and roll imaginary, with the myth of masculine freedom of the road exemplified by Dean Moriarty's "criminality," one which "was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy;

it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long prophesied, long a-coming" (Kerouac 8).

Like Kerouac's novel (which was published five years after *Wise Blood*), so, too, does *Wise Blood* highlight the car's importance to "the primarily masculine dream of always being able to chuck it all and walk away from whatever ties you down" (Ragen 55). Unlike Kerouac, however, O'Connor uses the image of the automobile in much of her work in order to "[develop] a critique of the myth of the American hero free from the constraints imposed by women, society, and God, along with the literary tradition that grew from the myth and the theological premise from which the myth sprang"; O'Connor shows "American heroes neither so free nor so innocent as the frontier myth would make them" (Ragen 57). To this end, I argue that *Wise Blood* offers an alternate genealogy for rock and roll rebellion, one that is less about self-discovery and more about a celebration of masculinist nihilism as it undercuts its own mythicness.

Although O'Connor claimed that Motes's nihilism ultimately brought him Christian salvation, it is, in fact, this very nihilism that so many musicians have claimed in their tributes to O'Connor and her first novel. The intensity of this vision is what captivates many, such as Ministry's Al Jourgensen. Explaining his original fascination with rock and roll, Jourgensen explains, "We were nihilists. We didn't know what that meant, but if it was accompanied with a disdainful, 'Fuck you!' we were all about it" (27). Motes's assertion that "I come a long way . . . since I would believe anything. I come halfway around the world" (*CW* 28), which Jourgensen samples, is just the kind of nihilistic statement that punk musicians like Jourgensen see as emblematic of their convictions. Jourgensen's allusion to *Wise Blood* in the Ministry song "Jesus Built My Hotrod" highlights the power of O'Connor's vivid portrayal of the automobile as an expression of a nihilistic vision.

In a frenetic song which evokes the ineffable ecstasy of American car culture, the rock and roll ethos of Ministry's song provides an intriguing contrapuntal⁴ rhythm with which to consider the role of the automobile in the O'Connor novel. Considering the novel through the lens of the song—especially the spoken-word opening—highlights the link between the nihilistic interpretation of the novel and the car-centered tradition of rebellion that runs throughout the history of rock and roll. In the song, a fast snare- and kick-drum beat starts up over the sound of race car engines after the spoken word opening. The samples of dialogue from Huston's 1979 film of *Wise Blood* play over the music, and then the song begins in earnest, with vocalist Gibby Haynes singing the mostly scating, nonsense lyrics referenced in the spoken-word part—variations of "ding a ding dang my dang a long ling long," interspersed with other sampled dialogue from drag races and other films, all of which relate to cars and drag racing.⁵ Particularly in the eight-minute, fifteen-second version of the song,⁶ the culminating effects of the driving, rockabilly-inspired industrial beats with screaming, asynchronous, processed lyrics create a wall of sound that might best be characterized by a line sampled in the song itself: "There's no use trying to talk—no human sound can stand up to this" (Jourgensen et al.). When combined with the car and drag racing references and samples within the song, the result is a frenetic celebration of American car culture as an exciting, "driving," uncontainable expression of American masculinity.

The sampled lines of dialogue in the beginning of "Jesus Built My Hotrod" are all of Motes evangelizing for what he comes to call his "Church Without Christ." The repeatedly sampled lines "Listen: get this" as well as "What are you talking about?" are both from an early encounter in the film between Motes and the taxi driver who first delivers him to

the house of prostitute Leora Watts. In both the novel and the film, the line, "Listen: get this," precedes Motes's saying, "I don't believe in anything" (CW 17). Despite O'Connor's insistence that Motes does eventually reach salvation by way of his route through nihilism, Jourgensen's choice of lines from the film to sample reveals that the significance of Motes's eventual conversion is often overlooked by an audience overwhelmed by the excitement of Motes's Church Without Christ. While Ragen argues that "O'Connor came to realize that her novel would be stronger if she allowed Motes to try to live out the male-dominated myth she wished to attack" (208 n. 6), he does admit that many (especially those whose experience of *Wise Blood* is the film version, not the novel) miss Motes's ultimate redemption because they are too swept up in the grandeur of his earlier, car-fueled, nihilistic vision. According to Ragen, "Motes's proclamation that his car has made him free catches the American myth of freedom and movement perfectly. There are many who would agree with Motes. I have seen John Huston's film version of *Wise Blood* twice, and both audiences cheered when Motes said that 'Nobody with a good car needs to be justified'" (219 n. 7; CW 64).

I believe that the popularity of this phrase, as exhibited both by cheering audiences as well as its evocation in samples and song lyrics, has arisen at least in part from a misunderstanding of the meaning of justification in this context. For example, the song "A Man with a Good Car" by punk band Gang of Four contains several allusions to *Wise Blood* which demonstrate an understanding of "justification" in the lines from the novel as meaning explanation or assistance. Ragen observes that the Gang of Four lyric "A man with a good car needs no justification / Fate is in my hands and in the transmission" (Gill and King) "reproduce[s] Motes' confidence in his ability to control his fate as long as he keeps driving" (Ragen 219 n. 7). In addition, musician A. J. Herring of punk band Velma and the Happy Campers (who have an entire album of Flannery O'Connor-themed songs) reports that he has "always been very attracted to her writing because it seems to revolve around brutal/bleak surroundings and no happy endings and these strange mostly 'moral' characters who are destroyed by their surroundings" (Herring). Herring's characterization of O'Connor's work as lacking happy endings and being filled with the destruction of moral characters demonstrates that it is the sense of nihilism which attracts so many punk musicians to O'Connor's work.

Through this identification with Motes's solitary autonomy, punk musicians have reified a reading of the character which emphasizes the masculine, independent, rebellious "American Adam" whose identity is firmly centered on his American automobile and the masculine freedom it embodies. However, unlike Kerouacian heroes, who mythologize the automobile as the ultimate tool for self-discovery, O'Connor's characters lack not only the linear pursuit of an end-goal in their driving but also any overt desire for self-knowledge.⁷ The only geographic destination of circuit preachers is to return home only to go back on the road; for them, their journey is the destination. By situating an origin of rock and roll in *Wise Blood*, I am following Ragen's lead in emphasizing the fact that rock and roll often celebrates the act of driving itself, especially driving which lacks a particular destination. Ragen cites Bruce Springsteen's "Thunder Road" as an example in which such movement is "a substitute for salvation in a religious sense" (65). If there is any purpose to this driving it is usually escape, what Ragen describes as "the modern idea of perfect freedom The automobile becomes the embodiment of the idea of complete freedom, freedom from the past and from responsibilities, freedom even from the taint of Original Sin and the need for a savior" (108). In O'Connor's hands, however, the attempt at such escape is ultimately futile. Motes's Jesus does, indeed, have him in the end.

The myth of such freedom, though, is tantalizing, especially in the masculine mode of this American fantasy. In their discussion of masculinity and rock and roll, Reynolds and Press observe that in twentieth-century American culture, “Women represent everything the rebel is not (passivity, inhibition) and everything that threatens to shackle him (domesticity, social norms). This ambivalence towards the feminine domain is the defining mark of all the classic instances of rock rebellion” (3). Ted Ownby similarly emphasizes the importance of gender to the theme of escape in the tradition of southern rock, observing that a great deal of the popularity of Lynyrd Skynyrd’s “Free Bird” was that the song “provided the most emphatic definition of freedom as the ability to ramble and not to stay with a particular woman. The narrator took the blame for leaving but once again simply had to leave to be true to his own nature” (381). Ownby sees similarities between the genres of punk rock and southern rock in that they both share a historical connection to the regional traditions of masculine violence: “Like Southern Rock musicians, punk rockers considered themselves angry and rebellious, so Molly Hatchet may have portrayed themselves as more menacing because, as southern white men, they were heirs to a tradition of violence” (376). Unlike southern rock, however, punk music does not apologize, but instead stays true to a vision of the solitary man rambling to no particular end.

Motes comes from a tradition of solitary men who, although they do have a certain objective in their rambling, generally lack any particular end-destination. His extreme religion is his inheritance from men who use the automobile to evangelize for their hellfire-fueled religion. Circuit preaching, of course, pre-dated the automobile by a century, as the first circuit preachers were assigned to their routes by the Baptist General Conference in 1804 in an attempt to preach to sparsely populated rural populations (Loveland 46). Like his grandfather, Motes, too, preaches from the hood of his Essex the gospel of a masculine, paternal Christ in agony on the Cross, reconfiguring a Christianity divested of any feminine, sanguine qualities. What the sampled lines in “Jesus Built My Hotrod” emphasize, however, is that, unlike his grandfather, Motes is dismissive of any promise of progress: putting his own disbelief into terms of travel, he says (in a line sampled in the song), “I come a long way . . . since I would believe anything. I come halfway around the world” (CW28). The promise of the automobile as Motes understands it is one of nihilistic salvation. Another related statement in the novel (which is partially sampled in the song) reads, “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” (CW93). The car here at once represents the promise of travel as well as its ultimate futility. As these iconic lines indicate, while the automobile may allow you to change your physical location, they do not provide any permanent escape from the problems of life. Circuit preachers return to their origin point; Jesus will follow you anywhere. No matter where you go, Jesus will have you in the end.

Many O’Connor scholars have discussed the negative meanings attached to the figure of the automobile in the novel, from ideas of dislocation and corruption to the manifestation of literal evil. Ragen, for example, identifies the car in the novel with the sin of pride. Reading *Wise Blood* as a retelling of the story of Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus, he observes that, while early depictions of the story showed Paul as a pedestrian, by the Middle Ages, paintings often showed Paul falling from a horse, a medieval symbol of pride, in the growing tradition of “fus[ing] the conversion on the road to Damascus with the emblem of the sin of Pride” (107). According to Ragen,

O'Connor "combines the biblical story of the enemy of Christ struck down on the road to Damascus with an image from contemporary culture" (108).

I agree with Ragen that "O'Connor exploits the accidental iconography that has grown up around the automobile in secular American culture" (154). In particular, the automobile in the novel represents an especially gendered space. Motes's pursuit of a Church Without Christ is at least partly a pursuit of a masculine faith. As Motes puts it, "I believe in a new kind of jesus . . . one that can't waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he's all man and ain't got any God in him" (*CW* 69-70). As Motes makes this statement when rejecting Sabbath Hawks's offer of Christian salvation, I read his rejection as specifically rejecting a nurturing, *feminine* Christianity represented by Sabbath (and, in fact, many of the women in the novel). It is, after all, Sabbath's father whose approval Motes seeks.

One key to this novel, then, is the bifurcation of faith into masculine and feminine arenas. Motes's Church Without Christ is a pursuit of a masculine faith, one he inherited from his father's father, and one which proposes a "new jesus" which is specifically "all man" (*CW* 69). Despite his patrilineal inheritance, the Jesus that Motes grew up with was primarily represented by his mother's smothering, Puritanical, emasculating faith. However, in a form of reverse Freudian family romance, Motes's evangelism of a "new jesus" allows him to pursue a version of his sexualized father by overcoming his mother's vision of Christianity. As Ralph C. Wood explains in his discussion of what he interprets as Motes's Freudian primal scene at the carnival, "No easy hedonist like his father, the boy [Motes] was overwhelmed by a nameless and placeless guilt, though he knew nothing of the Freudian link between *eros* and *thanatos* that the casket scene suggests" (168).⁸ I maintain that the key to Motes's new jesus is his description that he is "all man," a characterization which Motes connects to what is often seen as the nihilism of his religious vision—his Church is one without Christ. Certainly, Motes's masculine religious vision connects with Michael Kimmel's claim that "American men define their masculinity, not as much in relation to women, but in relation to each other" (5). Motes inherits his evangelism from his grandfather; he is inspired by Asa Hawks; and, his evangelism arguably has the strongest effects on Enoch Emery, Hoover Shoats, and the man whom Shoats hires to emulate Motes in his own "Holy Church of Christ Without Christ," Shoats' attempt to cash in on the growing popularity of Motes's ministry.⁹ In this way, Motes's ministry truly is a space of masculine performance, as each of these men, to varying degrees, participates in the project of performing their masculinity for other men, performances which (to a certain extent) forward an ultimately nihilistic theme.¹⁰

I see a similar connection between nihilism and performative masculinity¹¹ in not only the Ministry song but also in the genre of industrial music, a subgenre of punk music. To begin with, rock and roll is itself a traditionally masculine realm: Michael Kimmel is only one of many to identify rock and roll as a "form of masculine assertion" (235). With regard to the song "Jesus Built My Hotrod" specifically, *Wise Blood* holds a particular sway over many of the musicians in the genre of punk and its subgenre of industrial music. Most significantly, in the late 1980s Ministry labelmate Jim Thirlwell (of the band Foetus) formed a band called "Wiseblood" with Roli Mosimann of the Swanns. Thirlwell described the music of Wiseblood as "violent macho American" music.¹² As part of a tradition of industrial music, both Thirlwell and Ministry share what noted industrial music journalist V. Vale describes as industrial music's conviction that ". . . nothing is (or ever will be) sacred" (2). When combined with music journalist Jon Savage's characterization of

industrial music's "*anti-music* ethos" (5), the significance of *Wise Blood* to these musicians becomes clearer: the male-dominated, car-centered landscape within which Motes preaches his overtly nihilistic vision provides an ideal origin for the masculine nihilism of punk and industrial music.

Anti-music music and a denial of the sacred is a perfect analogue of Motes's Church Without Christ. Motes says that his church is one "where the blind don't see and the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way . . . [I]t's the church that the blood of Jesus don't foul with redemption" (*CW* 59). Frequently, Motes emphasizes both this nihilistic point of view as well as the masculinity of this nihilism: he explains that his church "don't have a Jesus but it needs one," a Jesus "that's all man . . . and it needs one that don't look like any other man so you'll look at him" (80). Such nihilism is in part a result of O'Connor's use of the novel genre, as her work often displays a tendency toward nihilism in this format, a tendency similar to that identified by David Leverenz in the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Examining why Poe's short fiction is generally acknowledged as much more successful than his attempts at longer narrative work, Leverenz explains that, "What can be riveting or shocking in the short story seems nihilistic and capricious in the novel" (100). Though he is talking about Poe, I think that this idea might be applied to the idea of the southern gothic in general, especially to the work of O'Connor. The shocking imagery that permeates *Wise Blood* creates a larger sense of nihilism which undergirds Motes's own vision of a masculine, nihilistic Christianity.

Though it is not present in the novel, rock and roll—especially in its industrial incarnation—is analogous to this kind of nihilism. As the spoken-word section of "Jesus Built My Hotrod" notes, there is a similarly nihilistic paradox in rock and roll: "this rock thing" announces that both "Jerry Lee Lewis was the devil" as well as that "Jesus was an architect previous to his career as a prophet." In other words, rock and roll as a philosophy is a paradoxical system which contains both the satanic as well as the divine¹³—but here, as in Motes's Church Without Christ, Jesus is not only the son of God, but also an "architect previous to his career as a prophet."

Ministry's description of Jesus is as enigmatic as the Jesus described by Motes: in both models, it is a more masculine, corporeal Jesus being described. If the car is a symbol of American masculinity, then a Jesus who is responsible for building a hotrod—the hotrod itself being a hyper-masculine, anti-establishment model—is one who is not afraid to get his hands dirty; is one who is able to create and build with his hands; is one who functions as an "architect." Similarly, Motes's Jesus is "one that's all man" (*CW* 80). The images of the nurturing, caring, feminized Jesus are no longer relevant in post-war America; it will take a "new jesus," one who is dangerous, corporeal, and powerful, to have any effect in the postmodern, mechanized America of the novel.

Certainly, the American automobile represents one manifestation of this divine, nihilistic vision. Motes awakens one morning with a "thought . . . full grown in his head" that ". . . he was going to buy a car" (*CW* 37). This apparently revealed vision of the automobile grows in spiritual stature throughout the novel. In fact, when Motes first asks the boy at the car lot the price of the Essex, the boy never actually tells him a price, but instead exclaims, "Jesus on the cross . . . Christ nailed" (38). A close reading of this passage reveals, then, that the car's value is equated to that of Christ. The car itself is a form of salvation, as Motes declares that "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (64). As the infamy of this line denotes, this line is a key theme in my reading of the novel. Importantly, when Gang of Four interprets these lines, they change them to "A Man with

a Good Car,” emphasizing that any *man* in possession of a “good car” has no worries: the car itself is a form of masculine salvation.

Motes’s relationship to his Essex in *Wise Blood* offers an aggressively masculine vision of the ineffable. As a symbol in both the song and the novel it also exemplifies what Doug Davis characterizes as the “technological sublime.” Drawing on the work of David Nye, Davis characterizes the category of the “technological sublime” in O’Connor’s work as “a triumphalist discourse in which new technologies and technological spaces convey emotional experiences once reserved for nature. The romantic imagery of the natural sublime . . . is applied to a historical parade of technologies with purportedly transcendent powers” (71). Certainly, *Wise Blood* is not the only place in O’Connor’s work that the automobile is connected to the sublime and the spiritual. In “The Life You Save May Be Your Own,” for example, Mr. Shiftlet makes a direct connection between the soul and the automobile, as he explains to Lucynell Crater (the mother) that “. . . a man is divided into two parts, body and spirit The body, lady, is like a house: it don’t go anywhere; but the spirit, lady, is like a automobile: always on the move, always . . .” (*CW* 179). The automobile has great potential for sublimity, in its metonymic relationship to the human soul. Reflecting what Michael Kreyling has observed as O’Connor’s “prefer[ence] to see the empirical world—the world of the flesh, of the body—as a set of symbols for the metaphysical” (9), the automobile’s metonymic relationship to the soul makes it a particularly appropriate symbol for her work, as the very real potential of danger and evil posed by the automobile is always a very real possibility in the souls of men and women in her fiction.¹⁴ The automobile dramatizes that moment of grace which “excite[s] the devil to fury,” O’Connor’s explanation of her work which is central to my reading.

Further, the image of the beat-up car in the South is highly suggestive of drag racing and its ancestor, running moonshine. As the end of “Jesus Built My Hotrod” includes samples of announcers talking about drag racing (as well as the sound of racing cars going by), reading *Wise Blood* through the lens of this song emphasizes the image of the car as a symbol of independence and flouting the law. Neal Thompson emphasizes the fact that not only southern bootleggers but also early stock car drivers and enthusiasts were proud of their outsider status: “Of course, dirt and danger were part of the appeal. Southern stock car racing grew quickly into a rough sport that attracted tough, dangerous, lascivious men who raced one another’s cars on the track, then settled scores afterward” (96). Such danger gave this illegal activity so identified with the South in general (and Georgia in particular)¹⁵ a romantic appeal. In the post-Depression South, “. . . it was becoming increasingly apparent that cars and speed—in particular, a Ford V-8—were tickets to a better life. A V-8 released a man from the ties to the land that had been his heritage [T]he automobile helped crack open new worlds to them (Thompson 48). Ragen, too, sees the stock car as emblematic of the automobile’s promise of freedom: “The automobile has probably taken on the role of liberator in the South more than in other sections of the country. It is in the South that Junior Johnson became a folk hero. Johnson’s fame rests not only on his skills as a stock-car driver but also on his ability to outdrive the law and escape the revenue agents. It is his car that makes him free” (95-96). Such descriptions of the romantic appeal of bootlegging and racing in the post-Depression South echo the rock and roll faith in the promise of freedom offered by the automobile.

Ragen observes that “O’Connor began writing as interest in the automobile was reaching its height. The wartime shortage of cars and of rationed gasoline gave way to an explosion of interest in cars in the late forties and early fifties” (60). Indeed, O’Connor

was quite aware of the existence of bootlegging and car culture. In a 1956 letter to "A," she reports that a Jesuit priest who had liked her stories had visited her driving a couple of different Cadillacs. O'Connor then tells the following story:

I asked him where he got his Cadillacs and he said they belonged to a liquor dealer he's bringing into the Church. I sent him off . . . with a 25¢ edition of *Wise Blood* for Mr. Ridley, the liquor dealer, as he said Mr. Ridley was much impressed that I had a book out in a drug store edition and said that was really where you made the money. Mr. Ridley said a book had to have a good many trashy spots for him to be able to appreciate it. I am waiting for his comment on *Wise Blood*. (11 Feb. 1956, *CW* 986)

Rather than a Cadillac, however, or one of Ford's many V-8 models preferred by many bootleggers and stock car drivers,¹⁶ Motes drives a "rat-colored" Hudson Essex in the novel. Although Hudsons were not as legendary among bootleggers and stock car enthusiasts as Fords, Hudsons were certainly worthy contenders in the field. Legendary stock car racer Red Byron, for example, lost his last race to Marshall Teague, who crushed Byron's Ford with his Hudson (Thompson 332). Especially in the 1950s, when NASCAR emerged as the leader in organized racing, Hudsons regularly beat the traditional champion Fords (344). Motes's car connects him to this specifically masculine underground community, an example of what Davis identifies as the specifically southern use of the technological sublime: a strategy that "illuminates regional, traditional, and communal ways of knowing and being" (79). In fact, Davis identifies O'Connor's work as the origin of this tendency in southern literature to revise "the sublime object of technology as a signifier of traditional community" (83). Like the moonshine and stock car drivers before him, Motes has an alliance with his car that runs him afoul of the law, as the car is ultimately destroyed by a police officer who pushes what he sees as a dangerous threat over a cliff.

Through this connection to moonshine running and drag car culture—the "hotrod" of the song title—Motes's car-based Church Without Christ is further embedded in a masculine culture of independence—one interpretation of "justification." Reynolds and Press point out that "Rock 'n' roll rebellion" arises "at roughly the same time as post-war 'mom-ism,' a fashionable critique which singled out the mother as the cause of a hefty proportion of America's ills" (4). Significantly, Thompson describes the drivers and bootleggers at the birth of stock car racing and NASCAR as being a "bunch of motherless, dirt-poor southern teens driving with the devil in jacked-up Fords full of corn whiskey" (10). Again, the mode of freedom that is celebrated by the automobile in rock and roll is a specifically masculine one, a freedom in which women are left behind, absent, or escaped from. As Ragen explains, "This dream of endless travel has always been a primarily masculine myth Women often are one of the things left behind on the journey into the wilderness" (60). A man's romance is with his car, not a woman: it is through the love of a good car—not a good woman—that justification is found.

The song "Jesus Built My Hotrod" explains justification through the spoken-word opening of the song, which traces a sort of conversion narrative. In this model of rock and roll salvation, first the devil as Jerry Lee Lewis is faced, then the true (or new) Jesus is realized through the recognition of his former career as an architect. It is only after this point that a transformation takes place, as the speaker "found himself in love with the world." Subsequently, this kind of rock and roll, hotrod America then requires a rock and roll salvation: the speaker is left to "ding a ding dang my dang a long ling long"—suggestive

nonsense lyrics, perhaps, but also emblematic of a sexualized salvation not unlike that of Motes. Certainly, his relationship with the prostitute Leora Watts is a step along his religious path. It allows him to break from the Christianity of his youth, the one he learned from his mother which requires self-immolation as punishment for sexuality. Though his new church appears to be a nihilistic rejection of all religion, the moral of the novel is ultimately one that is affirmative of Christianity, perhaps even despite itself.¹⁷

For Motes's religion is not simply one of nihilism; it represents a more complex iteration of faith. As Paul Nisly observes, "As one who believes in the Holy, O'Connor also recognizes the necessity for the obverse side, the demonic" (45). As in the Ministry song, there is an overt recognition of the devil. Further, the Jesus that Motes grew up with has a frightening, at times predatory, cast. Motes has been destined for the ministry since he was ten years old, and this destiny is a claustrophobic one: "That boy had been redeemed and Jesus wasn't going to leave him ever. Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed . . . Jesus would have him in the end!" (CW 11). Motes rejects any easy theology, such as Hoover Shoats' testimony that Motes's religion helped him ". . . bring my sweet nature into the open where ever'body could enjoy it" (86). Motes's Jesus is the antithesis of "sweet nature"; his is one of suffering and sacrifice.

Though I maintain that O'Connor's novel provides one foundation for a tradition of rock and roll which is inspired by her vision of nihilism, I also believe that it is the sublime scope of her work which evokes such inspiration. *Contra* Hoover Shoats, O'Connor's sublime is one without sweetness: rather, it is a sublime supported by what Patricia Yaeger refers to as an "aesthetics of torture," one which is not only painful for her characters, but one which incorporates the reader into the torture:

In O'Connor's most visionary and disembodied moments, pain enters in a new and vexing way. She opens a gap, a wound, an unbearable space of discomfort for the reader This gap between the mundane and the spiritual, the low and high, the pornographic and the biblical, becomes another rack upon which the reader is stretched. Encompassing these disparities is painful; it is like being put upon a wheel of fire to be asked to encompass this distance in one moment of reading. (196)

What Yaeger identifies as an unbearable gap in the reader's experience is, in fact, a potential connection to the sublime. Yaeger observes that O'Connor "bruises her characters to bring them to grace" (198); so, O'Connor forces her readers to face unbearable scenes such as Motes's rocks in his shoes, his barbed wire under his shirt, or even Enoch's repeated failures to connect with other human beings in order for us to get a glimpse of the nature of the sublime. Along with these other self-inflicted wounds, the power and danger which the automobile possesses in *Wise Blood* function as representations of the technological sublime, bulwarks not only of O'Connor's larger project of illuminating true religious ecstasy but also of the emergent, car-centered rock and roll culture.

As a symbol of both the demonic as well as escape, the automobile embodies the paradoxes of faith in the modern world that so intrigued O'Connor and that have inspired so many musicians. While it is tempting to see in *Wise Blood* what Jeffrey Folks identifies in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, that ". . . the popular belief in technology as a panacea had led the twentieth century away from religious faith and toward belief in a future paradise to be brought about by technology" (14), such a vision fails to take the idea of the technological sublime into account. Unlike Folks, who sees in O'Connor's writing "ample

evidence that the concept of mechanization is to be viewed in opposition to the religious message of her works" (14), I instead see technology in *Wise Blood* as providing a vision of a Christianity which includes a vision of evil as well as of the holy—what Linda Rohrer Paige identifies as Motes's role as a seer, "beholding the same vision, impurity" (327). Such complexity is an expression of the sublime.

O'Connor herself discussed the existence of evil within her work as crucial to her portrayal of divinity. In her words, a writer who is truly interested in addressing the ineffable will write fiction that

will always be pushing its own limits outward toward the limits of mystery, because for this kind of writer, the meaning of a story does not begin except at a depth where the adequate motivation and the adequate psychology and the various determinations have been exhausted. Such a writer will be interested in what we don't understand rather than in what we do He will be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not. (CW 816)

And this is ultimately what we see in Hazel Motes: a character who is forced out to meet evil and acts on a trust beyond himself. The characters in *Wise Blood* find themselves drawing upon an ineffable source never articulated more clearly than Enoch's "wise blood" or Motes's "new Jesus." Such a similarly inarticulated epiphanic turn happens in the spoken-word part of "Jesus Built My Hotrod," when the speaker, after realizing the true demonic nature of Jerry Lee Lewis (representing rock and roll) and the true corporeal nature of Jesus (as an architect), suddenly "finds himself in love with the world." Here, the speaker observes a direct connection between the early rock and roll icon (an icon particularly noteworthy for his infamous reputation) to the Son of God, emphasizing the contradiction at the heart of rock and roll between divine and evil inspiration which echoes similar contradictions with which so many of O'Connor's characters wrestle. Such ambiguous epiphanies as that in the song are a part of O'Connor's larger project: to demonstrate that the ineffable is, ultimately, a mystery to humanity, and any attempts to explain otherwise fall short of the truth.

The sublimity of O'Connor's vision along with her iconic status as an uncompromising artist is apparent in what I argue is her centrality to the punk-influenced subculture of rock and roll which continues to be influenced by her work, especially *Wise Blood*. The masculine rock and roll ethos exemplified by songs such as Ministry's "Jesus Built My Hotrod" highlights not only the moment of frenzy that marks the transition from nihilism to grace common in much of O'Connor's work but also her importance to the history of this particular rock and roll genealogy. Like the music that *Wise Blood* has inspired, the novel conveys an aggressively masculine vision of the ineffable, a model of masculine independence and nihilistic expression of the sacred, an echo of the paradoxical spirituality of O'Connor's unique spiritual vision. ♻️

Notes

- 1 Rock and roll is replete with allusions to Flannery O'Connor. From punk band Killdozer's song "Lupus" (about O'Connor), to Velma and the Happy Campers entire album of O'Connor-inspired songs (with titles such as "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "Wooden Leg" (an allusion to "Good Country People"), and "Cabbages" (a reference to the description of the mother in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"), to P. J. Harvey's song "Joy" about the character in "Good Country People," a wide range of musicians reference the author and her work in modern rock and roll. Even more mainstream bands such as R.E.M. and U2 have acknowledged O'Connor's influence on them in interviews and speeches; R.E.M.'s song "Oddfellows Local 151" even contains the line, "Why do the heathen rage behind the firehouse?" (Berry, Buck, Mills, and Stipe), a reference to O'Connor's short story and unfinished novel with a similar name.
- 2 Masculine car culture and rock and roll have been intertwined since their very beginnings, as illustrated by the 1951 song "Rocket 88" by Jackie Brenston and His Delta Cats. Considered by many to be the first rock and roll song, it celebrates the joys of driving the Oldsmobile "Rocket 88" model of the time (DeCurtis 75).
- 3 Motes cannot escape his fate even superficially, as his choice of civilian clothing upon returning from the war identifies him as a preacher to those he encounters: even his taxi driver assumes that he is a preacher, because he wears a "hat that looks like a preacher's hat" (CW 16).
- 4 My use of the word "contrapuntal" here has a twofold meaning: first, in the rhythmic sense, as a literal descriptor of the drum beat in the Ministry song; and second, in the sense of a counterpoint, as I explore how the Ministry song (in particular, the poetic spoken-word piece at the song's beginning) functions as a commentary on the O'Connor novel.
- 5 In addition to *Wise Blood*, the song also includes samples from the 1986 David Lynch film *Blue Velvet* as well as generic dialogue from drag race announcers.
- 6 This is the version designated as the "Redline/Whiteline Version," as opposed to the 3:45 version designated as the "Short, Pusillanimous, So-They-Can-Fit-More-Commercials-On-The-Radio Edit" on the CD sleeve.
- 7 While it is true the journey is also a primary focus for Kerouac's characters, most of their individual journeys have finite goals, such as to deliver a car from one coast to the other or to visit Old Bull Lee.
- 8 In this version of a Freudian primal scene, the young Motes sees a naked woman in a box in a carnival tent, and hears his father joke that "Had one of themther built into ever' casket . . . be a heap ready to go sooner" (CW 35). Upon his return home, his mother, sensing his guilt, hits him, and her remarks to Motes—"Jesus died to redeem you"—strike him as a threat, as he mutters in reply, "I never ast him" (36).
- 9 In fact, one could plausibly argue that Motes's ministry has the greatest effect on this character, whom Motes ultimately kills in a fit of anger.
- 10 My intention is not to claim that all of these men are engaged in a project of nihilism as consciously articulated as Motes's. However, by the end of the novel, Enoch has given up any hope of human connection, rejecting his own humanity by dressing up in a gorilla suit; Hoover Shoats has created a false prophet in an attempt to make money off of Motes's sincere ministry; Asa Hawks, revealed as a fraud, has left; and the man Shoats hires as his prophet is dead. The culmination of these events is a definite, emergent theme of nihilism and futility.

- ¹¹ I use the phrase “performative masculinity” here to emphasize the fact that such masculinity is an inherited identity construction and not an inherent property of their sex. See, e.g., Kimmel or Butler.
- ¹² Further, in the video for their cover of Rod Stewart’s “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy,” Al Jourgensen’s side project band Revolting Cocks appears to make several allusions to *Wise Blood*, particularly by beginning with a character dressed like Brad Dourif’s Hazel Motes—complete with preacher hat and black suit—appearing in a 1950s automobile. Though most of the video takes place in a strip club, I cannot help but notice the allusions to the novel, as at one point the preacher character even holds a small mummy, which I maintain can only be read as a reference to Enoch’s stolen “new Jesus” in the novel.
- ¹³ Jourgensen’s description of his earliest memories of rock and roll reflect a similarly paradoxical nature of the genre. On seeing the Rolling Stones on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, Jourgensen remembers, “They were performing ‘Paint It Black’ from *Aftermath*, and they embodied everything the nuns at school had warned me about. It was practically Satanic, and I was hooked” (13).
- ¹⁴ The end of Motes’s evangelical career is, in fact, brought about by the destruction of his car by the policeman who pulls him over and pushes his car off of an embankment. Even more significantly, Motes dies in a squad car after being found dying of exposure on the side of the road.
- ¹⁵ Dawsonville, Georgia, is considered by many to be the “moonshining capital of the world.” See Thompson 51-52.
- ¹⁶ See Thompson, esp. 34-35.
- ¹⁷ In her essay “A Matter of Life and Death” which accompanies the Criterion Collection DVD of the film *Wise Blood*, Francine Prose admits that there are many readers of the novel “who saw the story’s grotesqueness without quite catching its gravity.” In fact, Prose reports that the film’s director, John Huston, “seems to have been one such reader, persuaded throughout the filming of the unmediated comedy of Motes’s obsession” (7). It was not until filming the movie’s end that Huston realized that ultimately, the story “takes an exceedingly sharp turn toward Jesus” (8).

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