

# *Your Own Terrain:* Louise Cowan on the Land in Southern Literature as *Res* and *Sacramentum*

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When considering Dr. Louise Cowan's literary criticism, we must understand the central importance she gives to the symbolic image of the land. But is criticism the right word? We get 'criticism' from the Greek κριτικός, an adjective meaning 'able to judge, discerning'; 'discerning' comes from the Latin *discernere*, 'to separate, divide, distinguish.' The

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study of literature has become so increasingly specialized that scholars are masters of picking texts apart, but too often lack the creative imagination to see either the whole of an author's work or how an individual novel or lyric poem relates to the whole of human experience, mediated by the whole history of meditative *mimesis* of human action. The rare gift of Dr. Cowan's habit of criticism resides in her possession of such an imagination that presents her student with a view of the woods that does not eschew attention to the trees, that sees the trees as unique members of the forest community. Such a view allows for the acquisition of literary knowledge, different in kind from that bestowed by a careful study of politics or philosophy, though each discipline casts a different slant of light on our shared *cosmos*.

Attention to place, the land, and the importance of the teacher are recurring images in Dr. Cowan's writing. These images could be called 'themes'—but many of us, if pushed to define a theme, would describe it as a recurrent idea or concept in a written work. Yet in going back far enough to the root of 'theme' we find the Greek θέμα, 'that which is laid down, placed'; we could similarly call these aspects of Dr. Louise's thought 'topoi,' from the Greek τόπος, 'place.' Too often in our virtual age we disregard the importance of place, but the etymological prehistory of these words which currently denote discursive fields (there's another metaphorical place!) within the wide vistas of the written word indicate the necessity of location, space, place, even in our most imaginative ventures. The idea of the land as sacramental in a complex way which deserves investigation becomes evident the more one investigates Dr. Cowan's work on genre: the four kinds, she contends, are to be envisioned as regions of the *mundus imaginalis*, a world of poetic images (but no less real for that) in which, as she says, "the achieved images of poetry dwell (like Plato's forms, except that these are incarnated images made by the poets). . . it is an accretional region to which the genuine writer adds his images."<sup>2</sup> This imaginative aspect of her critical thought is remarkably freeing, showing us that the work of critical thought ought also to be creative rather than narrowly analytical. It is not wholly surprising that her conception of genre finds its imaginative basis in a predominant

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<sup>2</sup> Louise Cowan, "Caroline Gordon Lecture 2," in the Louise and Donald Cowan Archive at the University of Dallas. Electronic Archive, \Literature Lectures and Notes\American\Southern Lit.

symbol she perceived in the work of her teachers, especially Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom. To understand this foundation of Dr. Cowan's criticism, one must examine how she saw the land as central to the Fugitive-Agrarians' vision, distinguish the sacramental from the opposed religious view of the land, and clarify this sacramentality by interpreting the works of two authors close to her heart, Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor.

Although she had initially planned to write her dissertation on Dryden, both Davidson and Tate wanted Louise to write the official history of the Fugitive group; so she changed courses to write what would be later her first book, and the two of them brought her into contact with the men she would call the Fugitive-Agrarians, uniting their identities as the poets of *The Fugitive* magazine (1922-1925) and the cultural critics of the Southern Agrarian Movement, which produced most the manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) as well as the less known *Who Owns America?* (1936). Soon after publishing *The Fugitive Group: A Literary History* (1959), she and her husband Donald joined the faculty at the University of Dallas, where she began to remake the curriculum. While considering the tradition passed on by the great poets, she did not forget her mentors. She continued to publish articles on Southern literature, and in 1968, she organized the Southern Literary Festival in Dallas that took place April 18-20, at which Ransom, Tate, Lytle, and Warren were all present. The festival likely lingered in her mind as she composed the first in the 'Southern Series' of critical works published at the University of Dallas Press, her short book *The Southern Critics: An Introduction to the Criticism of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Andrew Lytle* (1971). At the time of its publication, *The Southern Critics* was to be succeeded by three volumes, *The Southern Poets* (1972), *The Southern Novelists* (1973), and *The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon* (1972), although only the latter, occasioned by Gordon's visit to the University, finally emerged.

Here, Dr. Cowan apprehended the Fugitive-Agrarians' enveloping symbol, central for later Southern authors: the land.

What they see is focused upon the symbol of the land. It is for them that body of the world which brings into concentration the entire meaning of life. Primarily the land, as symbol, is the good society; but it carries within itself by a complex set of analogies

all human values. The South first made the Fugitive-Agrarians aware of that subject, though the South has not really been that subject. Rather, they found in the defeat of the South an instance of the loss of the land; further, they were made aware of the universal plight of modern man and his homelessness by the threat of industrialism to a beloved region. But, just as Dante's central reality is a woman, and Virgil's is a city, for these three, the land itself—and *man's relation to it*—is the poignant reality to which their souls resonated, in their criticism as well as their poetry.<sup>3</sup>

Her comment here allows for a reinvigorated study of the Fugitive-Agrarians to emerge, one which, unlike recent albeit infrequent essays treating their work, does not primarily focus on the author's unease with the South's history or a critique of antebellum society, which although containing its peculiar evil (slavery), was not thus wholly distinct from all societies past and present in this regard.<sup>4</sup> Such study is warranted precisely because the loss of the South is paradigmatic for what too many of us—denizens of the 'unreal city' that T.S. Eliot observed in *The Waste Land*—have not ourselves lived. For although the Fugitive-Agrarians, like Eliot, were able to portray "the universal plight of modern man and his homelessness," namely, the alienation from the good society which today surfaces symptomatically in news headlines about the 'loneliness epidemic' and rising suicide rates, they did so within one of that society's last bulwarks, which although not wholly without stain, contained wisdom we are wont to forget. Contemplating their images of the land, then, is crucial for us today in our urban jungles and suburban deserts as we consider how we might reinvigorate communal life in a world after the loss of the garden.

But Dr. Cowan's parenthetical addition to her statement is of necessary importance, and distinguishes her project from that of

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<sup>3</sup> Louise Cowan, *The Southern Critics: An Introduction to the Criticism of John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks, and Andrew Lytle* (Irving: University of Dallas Press, 1971), 16. Emphasis mine.

<sup>4</sup> Such unease mars the otherwise intriguing reflection of Mark Jarman, "In Flight from the Fugitives," in *The Hudson Review* (Winter 2020); although Jarman notes that "contemporary interest [in the Fugitive-Agrarians] has waned," he fails to see that such waning stems from the our age's hasty, impulsive moralism, which unfortunately is as present in academia as in society at large. Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, "On the Tarantulas."

contemporary critics. In a time in which fanatical environmentalism considers human existence itself to be a scourge on the planet and a new 'ecopoetics' is urged so that postmodern poetic discourse (for one considers it too much a condescension and indeed a falsification of reality to give it that august name *poetry*) might recenter Nature as the measure of all things, remembering the fact that the Fugitive-Agrarians considered not human beings as either subsumed within Nature or as nature's antagonists, but the land "*and man's relation to it*" helps us to see their more urgent *telos*: to attain by analogy an understanding of man's place within the cosmos. To understand that goal we must distinguish between two religious views of the land: sacrality and sacramentality.

Sacrality considers the land to be itself divine, a source of transcendent experience for the individual, and in some cases for the village. The idea of land as sacral might call to mind certain strains of Hinduism, or perhaps Jean-Jacques Rousseau's myth of the state of nature, and thus certain tendencies of the Romantic poets or the German idealists. But we can look closer to home to see such a spirit pervading Ralph Waldo Emerson and his disciples Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, whose homegrown American pantheism within the Transcendentalist movement paradoxically underwrote the epistemic-ethical subjectivism which even now contributes to the fragmentation of American society.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Cowan wrote her MA Thesis at Texas Christian University on "Some aspects of Emerson's poetic diction" (1947) and later mentioned in a letter to friends that since that time she "had a distaste for Whitman":

I saw him then as one of the major descendants of Emerson  
(Emily Dickinson, in a quite antithetical way, is the other). I

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<sup>5</sup> For a political-philosophical analysis of Emerson in light of Tocqueville's concern with pantheism, see Bryan-Paul Frost, "Tocqueville's Worst Fears Realized? The Political Implications of Ralph Waldo Emerson's Transcendental Spiritualism," in *The St. John's Review*, Volume 55.1 (Fall 2013), 1-39; David L. Robbins provides a helpful analysis of how Emerson's path led him to nihilism, as well as an account of his influence on Friedrich Nietzsche, in "Emerson the Nihilist, *Redux Atque Resartus*," in *Between Romanticism and the Crisis of Modernity: The Mediatory Role and Transitory Nature of Emerson's Work*, *Litteraria Pragensia* 24.48, (April 2015), 93-136; most helpfully, Patrick Deneen shows how Orestes Brownson, a one time Transcendentalist companion of Emerson's, found his way out by acknowledging a transcendent lawgiver, a God outside the self. Cf. Deneen, "Transcendentalism, Ancient and Modern: Brownson vs. Emerson," in *Perspectives on Political Science* 37.1 (2008), 8-16.

knew then that Whitman was the enemy of all I stood for, though I grant his genius and his enormous, omnivorous power. The classical America, that inherited all the great writers of the past and built on them—that tradition, to me, is carried forward in Ransom and Tate in the South, and Frost and Stevens in the East. Faulkner, who is not Whitmanian in the least, is a greater “poet” than the great gray bard. The huge Self that Whitman celebrates, this omnivorous devouring Being that is at once sentimental and cynical, callous and overly tenderhearted—this seems to me the very image of sprawling democracy that America was not intended to be. And it has taken over in our popular culture.<sup>6</sup>

The huge Self cannot but get in the way of community; so too does a concomitant view of Nature which subsumes human beings. Just after the turn of the century, Dr. Cowan remarked that “for the most part we have placed too much emphasis on our inherited Romantic view of nature that sought to domesticate this fierce power. Through a kind of sentimental Arcadianism, we have been made to think that our very souls are tied up with the pastoral life, with what Wordsworth and Shelley and here in America, Thoreau, glorified.”<sup>7</sup> With such a view, we remain resolutely attendant only to nature’s surface, unable to read *via* the analogy of being that allows us to see a deeper sense to the pastoral life on the symbolic level which can nourish even those in the city.

The Whitmanian character who incarnates a certain sacral-land, pantheist spirit is not wholly foreign to Southern Literature; but when present, exists under protest or critique. In her survey of Caroline Gordon’s early short stories, an essay ironically titled “Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim,” Dr. Cowan argues that an analysis of Maury shows that “[t]he vital Southern love of the land and its conviction of the need for guardianship has declined in him to a self-indulgent passion for hunting and fishing; its communality has become a solitary quest for what

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to Pat and Murray, August 15, 2005, in the Donald and Louise Cowan Archive at the University of Dallas. Electronic Archive: \Correspondence\Whitman by Bloom wpd.docx

<sup>7</sup> “Nature,” Address to the Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 2001, in the Donald and Louise Cowan Archive at the University of Dallas. Electronic Archive: \Cowan Floppy Disk\Blank 8\Nature DIHC latest

must be a *secret* life of joy; its public figures have dwindled to private 'characters.' No, Aleck Maury is no epic hero".<sup>8</sup> He is no Achilles, Odysseus, Gawain, no Dante surely. Rather, he is

a man who, for all his gentleness and apparent traditionalism, is a romantic and a modern—a 'superfluous man,' as Turgenev characterized the figure... his relationship to nature is not sacramental and submissive, but calculating and eventually cunning... He is a *modern pantheist*, repelled by the womanishness of religion, having to seek the sacred far apart from society, and, as long as he has a pond or a stream, not needing God.<sup>9</sup>

Although Cowan suggests that Maury "is more whole than his New England counterpart," Melville's Ishmael, she concludes that he is "finally lost in his commitment to a private inner voice that, in the end, calls him to no communal quest, gives him no chance of regaining Ithaca or founding the new Troy, and leaves him in retreat, ever more defenseless against the wrath of Juno."<sup>10</sup> For Cowan, the "modern comic epic hero" possesses a certain innate frustration because of his alienation from a proper relationship to the land and the community of which it is the symbol; the land is no mere Walden Pond for *isolati*, but that which nourishes the communal dependence lived in a *polis* like Ithaca or Rome .

For the land to be sacramental, however, is not only for it to be symbolic. Although many literary critics have become concerned afresh with sacramentality and literature, especially when considering the work of Catholic authors such as Gerard Manley Hopkins or Flannery O'Connor, too often the signification of 'sacramental' as an analogical field remains uncertain. These critics, no doubt often Christians themselves, do not believe that literature is an ecclesiastical sacrament, given by God to his Church. But the seven sacraments are complex realities, and so to make works of literature analogically sacramental it must be clear which aspects of the sacramental reality inhere within the works. The sacraments are earthly, physical signs by which God's grace is manifested and given to

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<sup>8</sup> Louise Cowan, "Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim," in *The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon*, ed. Thomas H. Landess (Irving: University of Dallas Press, 1971), 16.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27. Emphasis mine.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

men; by the waters of baptism, we are made children of God within his Church. The baptismal font and the water used point beyond themselves to a spiritual cleansing, regeneration, effected within the soul of the initiate. The *sacramentum*, as St. Augustine called it, points beyond itself to another *res*, a higher reality; the mystery of the Eucharist, then, the *sacramentum sacramentorum*, is that it contains both *sacramentum*, the appearance of bread and wine which signify the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood, and also the *res*, the very body and blood themselves. Works of literature may clearly point beyond themselves, and of course, we have already seen that the land in Southern literature symbolically represents the good society. But another astonishing (albeit necessary) claim about the sacraments remains necessary for us to understand the image of the land as sacramental.

It was again in the time of St. Augustine, during the Donatist crisis, when arose the question not of the sacrament's essence, but of its efficacy. The validity, the efficacy of the sacraments depend not on the worthiness of those who celebrate them, but on the very fact of their being celebrated—they are true sacraments *ex opere operato*, from the working of the work itself. The presence of the beautiful or the sublime in literature can work similarly upon us: the *ekstasis*, the being lifted out of oneself that we experience when in the presence of a great work of art, does not come from historical or critical analysis or the personal virtue of the artist, but from an experience of the work which nonetheless teaches us. However, we must approach it with "eyes to see;" as with the sacraments, the reception of grace requires some openness of ours, something *ex opere operantis*—not that any activity of ours is sufficient, either to receive sacramental grace or the rapture of beauty, but the operation of both the sacraments and great literature respects our freedom and the character of our loves.

In Caroline Gordon's *The Women on the Porch*, we see the land as sacramental primarily in the first symbolic aspect, that of *sacramentum*, but under a mythic rather than theological aspect—for, as Dr. Cowan saw clearly in her preface to the novel, the story is essentially concerned with the interior, psychic life accessed through the novel's inner mythic form, which renders the conclusion of the plot more intelligible. The novel's action, as Dr. Cowan makes clear, is essentially an epic one: the *katabasis*, the hero's journey into the underworld, "the mysterious pattern finally

fulfilled in the harrowing of hell,"<sup>11</sup> here, a man losing and eventually recovering his wife. The paradox of the novel is that Jim Chapman is Orpheus, Heracles, and, at the same time, Hades; a major part of the novel's action is his transformation from Hades to Orpheus, albeit a successful Orpheus. His violation of his marriage by adultery sends his wife Catherine from their apartment in New York City to her ancestral home Swan Quarter in Tennessee, whose rural environs mythically portray "the nocturnal, feminine regions of the underworld."<sup>12</sup> The land here is no romanticized, idyllic construction of nostalgia, but a symbolic realm by which we can see the depths within each human soul. Her discovery of his infidelity sends Catherine driving south, "rushing on her flight as one plunges toward oblivion,"<sup>13</sup> and Swan Quarter is her natural destination only insofar as it is the alternative to driving straight into the sea and attaining death by water.

In *The Women on the Porch* the land manifests itself as the stoa before the gates of Hades, containing "Dante's trimmers. . . those who have not dared exist" as well as the women, "virgin, 'unravished bride,' widow, mother—[who] have made the great rejection," all "captured in a state of stasis, imprisoned in their own furious refusal to yield to the deepening of the soul that suffering and loss offer as recompense"<sup>14</sup>; but given this chthonic, Hadean land, the city is no resplendent, bridal Jerusalem. The city and the land stand as opposite but complementary patterns of life; just as in ancient Rome, where both were needed to comprise a *civitas*, the *agrum* and *urbs* exist in a mutually dependent, complementary relationship, as do husband and wife.<sup>15</sup> The corruption of either will lead to the other's decay, as can be witnessed in our continued suburban sprawl, in the continued growth of areas possessed by neither the traditional society supported by the land nor the vibrant, vital pace of life, arts, and philosophy inflamed by the *energeia* of the *polis*. In the novel,

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<sup>11</sup> Louise Cowan, "Preface," in *The Women on the Porch* by Caroline Gordon (Nashville: J.S. Sanders & Company, 1993), viii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, v.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>15</sup> For more on this, see Louise Cowan, "Vergil's Rome and the Cosmos of Southern Literature," in *Augustan Age*, ed. Robert J. Rowland, Jr. (Occasional Papers published by the Vergilian Society, 1987), 31-44.

Catherine flees from “a rootless society of soullessness and repetition,” the characteristic life of Jim, a poet-cum-professor of history who has “rejected the muse and made of the city a wasteland. . .even though he teaches Dante in his New York university [only on an ad hoc basis to special students], [Jim] has wandered into a dark wood where ego has replaced psyche, where death has replaced life, and the muse is silent. . .He has cut himself off from the springs of both love and poetry.”<sup>16</sup>

As Dr. Cowan perceptively suggests, the reunion and reconciliation of husband and wife which concludes the novel occurs only after each spouse makes an interior *katabatic* journey into the depths of their selves so as to encounter their “shadow,” for Jim a “repulsive ‘hobo,’ a streetperson, formerly a scholar,” and for Catherine her “rejected and unlovable cousin Daphne.”<sup>17</sup> The shadow, as ‘other-self,’ must be accepted for the self to find wholeness and thus for the self to love another, both as other, i.e. not for its own purposes, but also as itself, with the same ardor and engagement. The reunion of Jim and Catherine is therefore prepared psychologically, although only obliquely, but their reconciliation does not result from themselves alone, their own passion or love, “but something which results from the sacrament of their bond.”<sup>18</sup> It is finally the Chapmans’ marriage—which allegorically symbolizes the integration of the masculine and feminine within the soul and analogically symbolizes the great *komos*, the marriage feast of the Lamb, of God with his Chosen People—as sacramental *res* which reunites Catherine and Jim. The novel reveals to us, in a fascinating adaptation of the Fugitive-Agrarian symbolic understanding of the land as the good society, that the land most importantly in need of preservation (achieved through a cooperation of natural action and supernatural grace) is the *coniunctio oppositorum* of marriage, which effects “not simply. . .domestic life or erotic fulfillment,

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii, xiv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>18</sup> Louise Cowan, “Nature and Grace in Caroline Gordon,” in *Studies in Medieval, Renaissance, American Literature: A Festschrift*, ed. Betsy Feagan Colquitt (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University, 1971), 185. First published in *Critique* 1 (Winter 1956), 11-26.

but on one level, the life of the soul; on another, the future of civilization.”<sup>19</sup>

However, Dr. Cowan noted that the reunion “ending has puzzled readers, even such astute ones as Andrew Lytle. The reconciliation between husband and wife comes, on the natural level, out of the blue.”<sup>20</sup> Although the sacramental *res* of marriage operates within the novel’s *cosmos*, it remains hidden from the readers; as Dr. Cowan suggests, “this supernatural intrusion can be surmised only from the apparently powerful mutual change of heart and from the controlling symbols within the whole work,” such as the symbols of water, flesh, and dawn.<sup>21</sup> The sacramental character of Gordon’s novel differs from that of her most famous apprentice precisely in the visibility of the *res* most deeply at work.

A similarly creative symbolic shift can be witnessed in the work of another writer, an heir to the Fugitive-Agrarians’ legacy and to Gordon’s writing prowess, namely, Flannery O’Connor. Although Dr. Cowan highly valued O’Connor’s work, adding her short stories to the Literary Tradition IV curriculum as early as 1960 (within O’Connor’s own lifetime), and listing “Flannery O’Connor’s Constant Revelation” as a speaking topic in her vita, she left behind little critical work on O’Connor, published or otherwise. The major exception is her introduction to a 2005 Trinity Forum edition of one of O’Connor’s best known and loved short stories, “Revelation,” entitled “Passing by the Dragon: Flannery O’Connor’s Art of Revelation.” In this essay, she provides what would be considered by anyone familiar with O’Connor scholarship a customary introduction to O’Connor, both in terms of her biography and the major aspects of her writing—her opposition to secular modernity embodied through literary violence and her use of irony and the grotesque in a darkly comic world—although Dr. Cowan asserts that “it is a mistake to take her stories as satire [because she] does not adopt a position superior to her characters but quite obviously views the worst of them with

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<sup>19</sup> Cowan, “Preface,” viii. For more on Dr. Louise’s understanding of marriage, see her 1995 essay “Marriage as a Creative Work,” in *Newsletter of the Thomas More College of Liberal Arts*, 21.1 (November 2003), available by email to the author.

<sup>20</sup> Cowan, “Preface,” xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Cowan, “Nature and Grace,” 185, 185-186.

sympathy.”<sup>22</sup> Dr. Cowan also spends several paragraphs elucidating O’Connor’s sense of her region and the way in which her consideration of Southern manners occurred within, as O’Connor noted, “the light of an ultimate concern.”<sup>23</sup> The essay then concludes with an analysis of “Revelation” and final comments on how O’Connor saw that the “Christian artist’s vision is a prophetic vision, however, not in the sense of predicting the future but of seeing clearly the things that are hidden.”<sup>24</sup>

Much critical analysis of O’Connor’s work has focused on the character of O’Connor’s “freaks” and the nature of her use of the grotesque, missing those elements which are hidden in plain sight, namely, the place in her writings of what Faulkner, and Dr. Cowan following him, often called “the old verities”: the symbolic realities of the land and the city, among other aspects of human life. She notes that O’Connor “is a writer of infernal comedy”—a unique part of the terrain of comedy which Dr. Cowan conceived of as divided analogically between three realms, represented by those of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, the regions infernal, purgatorial, and paradisaical—and attention to this conception of comedy would do much to redress generic debates concerning O’Connor’s works. “The first, infernal comedy, is a state in which grace is utterly absent and where selfishness and malice prevail. The community has accepted its fallen condition and cynically attributes its corruption to “the way of the world.” Love cannot dwell in such a society; everyone is fundamentally alone, though hypocrisy and self-serving may give the appearance of friendship. . . This is the prevailing moral climate of such a world; not everyone in it however is in the infernal state.”<sup>25</sup> For O’Connor, whom contemporary critics have called an “incarnational” and “sacramental” artist, place and the physical aspects of our being human are of crucial importance, and it is thus odd that so few studies of her first novel, *Wise Blood* (1952) have considered the role of the city and the land

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<sup>22</sup> Louise Cowan, “Passing by the Dragon: Flannery O’Connor’s Art of Revelation,” in *Revelation* by Flannery O’Connor (Trinity Forum 2005), 4.

<sup>23</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1970), 29, “The Fiction Writer & His Country.”

<sup>24</sup> Cowan, “Passing by the Dragon,” 13.

<sup>25</sup> Louise Cowan, “Introduction: The Comic Terrain,” in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed. Louise Cowan (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture: 1984), 11.

as place of the extension of narrative action; indeed, an understanding of the land in the novel as a sacramental place enlightens us to the significance of several crucial moments within the movement of the soul of its hero, Hazel Motes.<sup>26</sup>

The majority of the action of *Wise Blood* takes place in the city of Taulkinham, where—as is characteristic of the infernal city, what Eliot called in *The Waste Land* the “unreal city”—“grotesque and bestial forces are not far underneath its surface”<sup>27</sup> (not surprisingly in a city named, phonetically, “talking ham”). However, at three crucial moments Motes drives out into the country-side, into the land, which is sacramental both within O’Connor’s poetic *cosmos* as *res ex opere operato* delivering grace to Hazel and as *sacramentum* within the *logos* that expresses her poetic universe, revealing to her readers the analogical relationship between the narrative place of the land and the grace of the kingdom of heaven. The first moment occurs in the middle of the novel, in Chapter 7, when Motes takes his rat-colored Essex roadster “out into the country to see how well it worked on the open road.”<sup>28</sup> While critics conventionally consider Haze’s car to be symbolic of his modern, secular sense of independence (as he said in the previous chapter, “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified”<sup>29</sup>), the car also stands in for Haze’s conception of his own human nature: basically good, in need of perhaps minor mechanical tune-up from time to time. This idea of human nature is however radically at odds with that at the heart of the traditional society represented by the land, where man is essentially communal and fallen—in need of societal manners to fit him for community and grace to assist him against sin, an affront not only to God, but also, as Dr. Cowan said of the theme of *hubris* in the works of John Crowe Ransom, a “sin against the human community by a refusal

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<sup>26</sup> Some studies have treated these aspects, in a penetrating although cursory way. See for instance Christina Bieber Lake, *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O’Connor* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), 60-62, Marcel DeCoste, “This is My Body: The Saving Knowledge of Suffering Flesh in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*,” in *Religion & Literature* 49.2 (Summer 2017), esp. 72-72. The best of these, and too little known among O’Connor critics, is that of John Alvis, “*Wise Blood*: Hope in the City of The Profane,” in *Kerygma: A Journal of Comment* (Dallas, The University of Dallas, Winter-Spring 1965), 19-29.

<sup>27</sup> Cowan, “Introduction: The Comic Terrain,” 11.

<sup>28</sup> Flannery O’Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2007), 115.

<sup>29</sup> *Wise Blood*, 109.

to participate in the finite order."<sup>30</sup> Although Dr. Cowan wrote that the communal world of Southern literature was only present in its "superficial aspects" in O'Connor's fiction, perhaps the superficiality of her first novel's vision of community results precisely from the infernal terrain which O'Connor so frequently surveys, as opposed to the sections of the epic cosmos typically witnessed by Gordon and the Fugitive-Agrarians.

The country into which Hazel Motes drives in Chapter 7, however, is nothing if not paradisaical, and O'Connor's narrator is at pains to show her readers the divine presence at work above the narrative geography. Just as Motes drives into the land, we are told that "the sky was just a little lighter blue than his suit, clear and even, with *only one cloud* in it, a *large blinding white one with curls and a beard*."<sup>31</sup> The cloud strikes us as a divine presence, an image, albeit not painted distinctly, of an Old Testament Jehovah; he is "only one," the one *who is*, large and blinding (a striking word given the novel's emphasis on tropes of vision) but also with humanizing curls and a beard. The narrator shows us this cloud at the moment when Haze indulges in the pleasant illusion that he himself is the "only one" in the car. However, as will soon become apparent, the Essex contains a stowaway, Sabbath Lily Hawks, an ironically named girl of 15 who has set out to seduce Haze, even as he, imagining her as an innocent, plans on seducing her to show her preacher father that Haze does not believe in sin or evil. After this revelation that he is not alone, the narrator reminds us that Haze and Sabbath are not alone in the land, calling to mind the aforementioned divine presence: "The blinding white cloud was a little ahead of them, moving to the left."<sup>32</sup> Given this intimation of divine presence, the land should be read symbolically as a place in which and through which, God is present and gives grace to those who seek His face, even those like Hazel who do so *malgré lui*, against himself. The grace made manifest through the land explains Haze's apparent *idée fixe* throughout the chapter, as he fixates on theologically understanding how a good man could be the father to a bastard, and how the idea of bastard fits within his new church, the Church Without Christ. This fixation, odd as it may be, serves to distract him from understanding Sabbath's

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<sup>30</sup> Louise Cowan, "The Communal World of Southern Literature," in *The Georgia Review* 14.3 (Fall 1960), 252.

<sup>31</sup> *Wise Blood*, 115. Emphasis mine.

<sup>32</sup> *Wise Blood*, 118.

seductive intent in her numerous flirtatious actions, and therefore helps him avoid mortal sin. It even allows Haze to ignore the demonic voice in his head, which insists that “there was only one truth—that Jesus was a liar. . .and that a bastard couldn’t be saved in the Church Without Christ.”<sup>33</sup>

But when he tries to leave, the Essex fails to start; even though grace assists nature in turning aside from evil, grace also reveals the inadequacy of nature understood as autonomous. Although he does so only grudgingly, Haze must accept the help of another, of a man who appears, not out of the gas station towards which he has hastily stalked, but “from out of the woods behind it.”<sup>34</sup>The narrator presents the man, although surely associated with the gas station, as a figure emerging from the forest, which parallels Haze’s youthful imagination of Christ: “he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark.”<sup>35</sup> This resemblance and the man’s gratuitous gift to Haze marks him as the chapter’s Christ-figure. In the midst of a world where talk is cheap, the man remains silent, speaking only twice in an enigmatic fashion, as Jesus did before Pilate. The man is one armed, showing not only that grace and the perfection of charity do not require bodily perfection or the physical strength that might serve the autonomy for which Haze strives, but also that there is a place for Haze to, like St. Paul, “fill up those things that are wanting of the sufferings of Christ, in my flesh, for his body, which is the church” (Col 1:24).

When Haze asks the man what he owes him for fixing the Essex and for the gas, the man responds twice with the same message, “Nothing. . .not a thing.”<sup>36</sup> Haze only counterfeits gratitude, as his insistence on independence must deplore dependence on others. Although he thanks the one-armed man, once he drives past him, he says “I don’t need no favors from him,” and when Sabbath compliments the car, he insists on its nativeness and wholeness, which parallels his confidence in the resources of autonomous human nature: “It ain’t been built by a bunch of foreigners

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<sup>33</sup> *Wise Blood*, 120.

<sup>34</sup> *Wise Blood*, 122.

<sup>35</sup> *Wise Blood*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> *Wise Blood*, 124.

or niggers or one-arm men.”<sup>37</sup> When the two cars pull up at the boundaries of the land, the end of the dirt road, Haze looks at the man and insists on his autonomy: “‘I told you this car would get me anywhere I wanted to go,’ Haze said sourly.” But the one-armed man’s enigmatic response points instead to the essential limitation of material things: “‘Some things,’ the man said, ‘I’ll get some folks somewheres’.” After all, it was not the wealth or the knowledge of the one-armed man which restarted the Essex, but the essentially gratuitous gift of self which rests at the heart of the good society, especially that most perfect society, the Holy Trinity, to which the land plays host. Haze’s emphatic rejection of gratitude and his insistence on self-sufficiency reveals the psychological movement that precedes his turning away from the land. In the chapter’s final sentence, as Haze returns to the city, he flees God in His very relationality, revealed symbolically not as the “only one” Jehovah, but as Trinity with the coming of the Spirit: “The blinding white cloud had turned into a bird with long thin wings and was disappearing in the opposite direction.”<sup>38</sup>

While there remains more to discuss in relation to the symbolic valences of the land in *Wise Blood*’s final chapters, this beginning we have made, following Dr. Cowan’s apprehension, helps elucidate the strange intrusion of a paradisaical moment into a novel of infernal comedy, such that we can see that the land remains for Flannery O’Connor, as for her literary forebears, sacramental with respect to both *res* and *sacramentum*. Only such a view of the land and our relationship to it can become, as Dr. Cowan put it in a lecture she delivered at LSU, “the organizing principle of culture.” Concluding this lecture, she posed the question, “What do we learn from modern Southern literature?” and answered that “Southern writing teaches us something that we did not know about human culture, about tradition, about myth; it enlightens us about the corporate nature of our lives; it attests that we are embodied creatures; it reminds us of our ties to each other; it celebrates the glory of language in a time of cynicism and doubt.”<sup>39</sup> If our time is more cynical and full of doubt than when she

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Wise Blood*, 125.

<sup>39</sup> Louise Cowan, Untitled Lecture at LSU on Southern Literature, in the Louise and Donald Cowan Archive at the University of Dallas. Electronic Archive, \Reorganized Files\Cowan Own Work\Literature Theories\POSS1 lsu.docx. [undated. Either 1985, 1994, or 1998]

wrote these words, it is fitting that we both reconsider what modern Southern literature can teach us through the image of the land and remember those words of a great teacher who turned us towards the light.