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Hazel Motes, War Veteran
Wise Blood and the Early Theorization of Shell-Shock

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Abstract: This article claims that Hazel Motes in Flannery O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood* fought in the desert war in North Africa in 1943 and might suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (first diagnosed in the First World War as shell-shock). Hazel's shell-shock, this article argues, becomes the foundation for O'Connor's drama of salvation in the novel. In elaborating this drama, O'Connor also incorporates into her novel two of the principal theoreticians of shell-shock in the interwar period – Sigmund Freud and Karl Barth (her novel also relates to the work on shock by Walter Benjamin although O'Connor was probably not aware of his writing). These authors, both major contributors to the discourse of modernity, provide O'Connor's aesthetics of shock with an intellectual context. Freud's analysis of shell-shock in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* helps to make explicable Hazel's self-destructive push toward death; Barth in *The Epistle to the Romans* shows how the sudden, violent bestowal of God's grace on Motes is like a military assault. If total or world war becomes by the late 1940s the paradigm of contemporary experience and one that is reflected in Hazel's medical state, then O'Connor's drama of salvation plots Hazel's emergence from this most desperate of secular dead ends.

Keywords: the Second World War, post-traumatic stress disorder, Karl Barth, the otherness of God, Sigmund Freud

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Hazel Motes, weteran wojenny
Wise blood (Mądrość krwi) i wczesna teoretyzacja wstrząsu pourazowego

Streszczenie: W artykule zawarto tezę, że Hazel Motes, bohater powieści *Wise blood* (Mądrość krwi) Flannery O'Connor, walczył na pustynnym froncie w Afryce Północnej w 1943 roku i może cierpieć na zespół stresu pourazowego (po raz pierwszy zdiagnozowany podczas I wojny światowej jako „wstrząs bojowy"). Według autora artykułu, wstrząs bojowy Hazela staje się fundamentem dramatu zbawienia przedstawionego przez O'Connor w powieści. Budując ten dramat O'Connor włącza do swojej powieści dwóch głównych teoretyków wstrząsu bojowego z okresu międzywojennego – Zygmunta Freuda i Karla Bartha (jej powieść odnosi się również do prac Waltera Benjamina na temat szoku, choć prawdopodobnie O'Connor nie znała jego twórczości). Ci autorzy, będący ważnymi uczestnikami dyskursu nowoczesności, dostarczają intelektualnego kontekstu dla estetyki szoku O'Connor. Analiza Freuda dotycząca wstrząsu bojowego zawarta w *Poza zasadą przyjemności* pomaga wyjaśnić autodestrukcyjne dążenie Hazela do śmierci. Barth w *Liście do Rzymian* pokazuje, jak nagłe, gwałtowne obdarowanie łaską Bożą przypomina atak wojskowy. Jeśli totalna lub światowa wojna staje się pod koniec lat 40. XX wieku paradygmatem współczesnego doświadczenia – i znajduje odzwierciedlenie w stanie medycznym Hazela – to dramat zbawienia O'Connor ukazuje jego wyjście z najbardziej rozpaczliwego świeckiego impasu.

Słowa kluczowe: druga wojna światowa, zespół stresu pourazowego, Karol Barth, odmienność Boga, Zygmunt Freud

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A number of Flannery O'Connor's characters, such as Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood* (1952) or Mr Shiflet in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" (1953), are veterans of the Second World War. Others such as the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" (1953) and O.E. Parker in "Parker's Back" (1965) have served in the armed forces without O'Connor specifying when or where this service took place. How does one interpret this insistent biographical tic in these characters? Certainly it might suggest the existential rootlessness that distinguishes such drifting O'Connor characters as Hazel Motes: it is fitting that their profession is that of the U.S. soldier who travels to the far ends of the globe. But O'Connor could be indicating more than the fact that Hazel has a dislocated personality. The prevalence of veterans and ex-servicemen in O'Connor's fiction could point to her belief that war is a theological staging-post on the path to grace. Demonstrating this belief as it is worked out in *Wise Blood* will be the argument of this essay.

This article will try to show, first of all, how O'Connor presents Hazel Motes as a case study of war trauma[1]. It will describe how his symptoms can be correlated quite closely with those described in the clinical studies of conflict experience of the first half of the twentieth century (by medical observers such as W.H.R. Rivers). But Hazel is more than a bundle of symptoms. He is a peculiarly rich and thought-provoking character who inhabits an indeterminate border between theology and a metapsychology of nihilism. As such, Hazel's predicament calls out for a more conceptual framework of his medical state. This need, it will be argued, explains O'Connor's incorporation in her text of two theoretical interpretations of war shock that arose shortly after the First World War. These are the interpretations of Karl Barth in *Epistle to the Romans* (1922) and of Sigmund Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). Barth and Freud: this is a strange, not to say antipathetic, conjunction. Perhaps only the idiosyncratic Catholic imagination of O'Connor could fuse these two minds together to create a unique variation of war neurosis.

The Second World War in the Early Life of O'Connor

Flannery O'Connor's early college education dovetailed with the development of the Second World War and with the return of veterans to the United States. Between 1942 and 1945 O'Connor studied at Georgia State College for Women, and, according to her biographer Brad Gooch, she and fellow students avidly followed America's participation in the war.[2] Then, between 1945 and 1947, she went to Paul Engle's Writer's Workshop at the University of Iowa. More than half of Engel's class were returned servicemen and their apprentice writings were often naturalistic accounts of their own war experience.[3] In O'Connor's short story "The Train" (1947), an early version of *Wise Blood* written for her Iowa MA thesis, Hazel Wickers can be compared to the fictional returnees of her workshop colleagues and, as is the case with them, he is not placed in any particular religious milieu. But when the short story was turned into a novel, O'Connor surrounded the topical figure of the returning veteran with a strong religious context. She signalled this change by changing Hazel's surname from Wickers to Motes. Motes, as many critics have observed, is derived from Matthew 7:3: "And why seest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye; and

[1] One of the anonymous reviewers of this article pointed out that Hazel Motes's military career has been discussed in Stacey Peebles's "He's Huntin" Something: Hazel Motes as Ex-Soldier" (2011: 386), which highlights Motes's war experiences and makes good use of the trauma studies of Cathy Caruth to illustrate Motes's condition of being unable to remember the war and yet unable to forget it. Where Peebles's (2011: 384) approach differs from my own is that she tends to see Motes's "struggle with […] Christ […] as a symptom of a larger problem." That is, in her interpretation the war experience is the significant part of Hazel's life, while the religious struggle tends to become an epiphenomenon of this central event. My article reverses this order of priorities.

[2] The college served as an operational centre for the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services) and was surrounded by army bases. For O'Connor's engagement with the war while at the college see Gooch 2009: 87–88, 96–101.

[3] Gooch (2009: 135) observes of the creations of O'Connor's classmates that "[s]he borrowed from these war-torn heroes for her own more comic antihero."

seest not the beam that is in thy own eye?" (in the Douay-Rheims translation with which the Catholic O'Connor would be most familiar).[4]

A number of critics such as Jon Lance Bacon (1995: 25–49) and Myka Tucker-Abramson (2017: 1166–1180) have shown that O'Connor's fiction can be productively situated within her historical context. Even though the ultimate horizon of this fiction for O'Connor herself is that of the eternal ontological truths of Roman Catholicism, this is not to claim that her writing is not sensitive to historical pressures and in particular to that of the Second World War (which some historians argue changed the South even more than the Civil War). Or, to put the matter in the form of the medieval hermeneutics that O'Connor applied to her work, the literal or historical level of the story had to inform the anagogic level (the anagogic she defined as "the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (O'Connor 1969: 111).

Hazel Motes, the Second World War, and Shell-Shock

In the first chapter Hazel is given a definite military profile:

> The army sent him halfway around the world and forgot him. He was wounded and they remembered him long enough to take the shrapnel out of his chest – they said they took it out but they never showed it to him – and they sent him to another desert and forgot him again. (O'Connor 1988: 12)

The American army was not often involved in war operations in the desert during the Second World War so Hazel's war service can be pinned down quite specifically to his participation in Operation Torch, the Allied invasion of French North Africa in November 1942. The North African campaign lasted until May 1943, when the Germans and Italians were driven out of the continent. Yet, for all its ultimate success, Operation Torch was a baptism by fire for American soldiers. Hazel might have been part of the disastrous rout of American forces by Field Marshal Erwin Rommel at the battle of Kasserine Pass in Tunisia in February 1943.[5] If this inference about Hazel's Tunisian service is correct, then he took part in the one theatre of the Second World War where the impact of battle stress for the American soldier was at its highest. As Hans Pols observes, in the Tunisian campaign as many as thirty-five per cent of all wounded were cases of mental breakdown. This rate Pols

[4] The comparison of Hazel's surname to the passage in Matthew 7 is common in the criticism of O'Connor. For example, Donald Gregory (1975: 52–67), says "The allusion implicit in Haze's surname is straightforward enough, and Haze's hypocrisy […] is clearly suggested by Matthew 7: 3–5 […]" (Gregory 1975: 53).

[5] Hazel after wounding is sent to "another desert." The army might have withdrawn him from the frontline of the North African campaign and then sent him back to the frontline after recovery at some time before May 1943. Alternatively, the other "desert" might have involved occupation duties in Africa after the end of the actual fighting (few other areas in the Second World War that saw an American military presence, apart from Africa, would qualify as "desert").

ascribes to "the lack of experience and training of the American armed forces and the initial superiority of the German army."[6]

Hazel Motes suffers from what was in the First World War called shell-shock (later, in the 1980s, called post-traumatic stress disorder). Hazel's[7] condition is apparent from the opening scene of the train journey to Taulkinham (Atlanta, Georgia). He sits apprehensively at a "forward angle" and looks as though he wants to jump out of the train window; his twenty-two year old face has deep premature creases; and his eyes are empty (later Sabbath Hawkes says of his eyes: "They don't look like they see what he's looking at," although she adds that "they keep on looking") (O'Connor 1988: 3, 61).[8] Above all, he exhibits a verbal aggressiveness that seems constantly trying to fend off the repetition of some past shock, as though this shock has been incompletely assimilated. In Hazel's case this past shock is bound up not only with battle trauma but with what he sees as the invasive threat of Christian belief. In conversation with Mrs Hitchcock, for example, Hazel says out of nowhere, "I reckon you think you been redeemed" (O'Connor 1988: 6). Similarly he tells the woman in the dining car with the "bold game-hen expression": "Do you think I believe in Jesus? […]. Well I wouldn't even if He existed. Even if He was on this train" (O'Connor 1988: 7). He keeps up this anticipative parrying throughout the novel. "I am CLEAN" he insists to the woman at the ice cream parlour when she asks why a "clean boy" such as him accompanies a grubby person like Enoch Emery, the zoo guard (O'Connor 1988: 51–52). Hazel cannot tolerate the merest suggestion that he needs to be cleansed of sin (although this meaning is not what the woman has in mind).

Freud: Shell-Shock and the Metapsychology of War

Shell-shock was first diagnosed by First World War army doctors such as W.H.R. Rivers. They observed that some traumatic experiences on the battlefield did not leave a visible lesion, but did result in a delayed nervous response, especially that of having nightmares that repeated the moment of shock in hyper-mimetic detail.[9] These dreams of war trauma intrigued Sigmund Freud because of their anomaly: they did not aim at pleasure, as Freud had previously assumed about the dream process. When he took up the question in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he was forced into a major revision of psychoanalysis. In this work Freud now explained that the penetration of the protective shield by battlefield

[6] Pols 2011: 313–320, 314–315. Pols says that compared to the 35% figure for the Tunisian campaign, only 2% of wounded in World War One classified as mental breakdowns and only 12% of all Allied wounded in World War Two.

[7] Mirosława Buchholtz (the Polish translator of this article) points out that Hazel is usually shortened to Haze in the novel, a shortening that corresponds to Hazel's bewildered psychological state (he is in a haze).

[8] This symptom of combat fatigue (the new name for shell-shock) in the Second World War was memorialized in Tom Lea's 1944 painting, "The Marines Call It That 2,000 Yard Stare." See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thousand-yard_stare#/media/ [4.12.2024].

[9] Sometimes shell-shock cases did have some kind of wound (as does Hazel), but more frequently they did not.

stimuli caused the mind to try to bind or master this trauma by compulsively repeating the scene of its origin. Freud went on to make a controversial metapsychological speculation. This attempt at mastery was not ultimately self-preservative but was driven by a primitive, conservative drive rising up from the unconscious, which Freud called the death drive; this he contrasted with the reproductive or life drive. The aim of the death drive was to restore a tensionless, pre-animate state of being, a state that would be free of the trauma of the sudden incursion of stimuli. Freud contended that the body, by compulsively reviving shock experiences, was trying to reintegrate these intrusions into a pre-existing and ultimately regressive state of homeostasis. These speculations fitted the recent catastrophe of total war, which had shown the inadequate defences of the human body before the overwhelming force of conflict.

Two conclusions can be drawn from Freud's essay that are relevant to *Wise Blood*. Firstly, Freud claimed that the task of the organism was to defend against stimuli even more than it was to experience stimuli. When this defence failed – as was the case in war neurosis – this was due to "a lack of preparedness" on the part of the conscious mind and it was "the subsequent overreaction that made a situation traumatic" (Geroulanos [&] Meyers 2018: 226). Hazel's constant anticipative parrying and compulsive nightmares are his attempt to rehearse the moment of trauma so that this time he can be prepared for it. Secondly, Freud asserted that this attempt of the organism to return to an antecedent status quo revealed a deep, recuperative drive because the organism's response to being overwhelmed was to regress to a state of zero tension or of non-existence. This drive is seen in Hazel's narrative trajectory as he is pushed by his repetition compulsion toward death. These two strands of Freud's analysis of war trauma are captured in the first appearance of Hazel, who is poised between leaning forward in his seat to anticipate stimuli and wanting to jump through the train window to his death.

In the interwar period literary critics, notably Walter Benjamin, took Freud's analytical descriptions of the defensive organism as the basis for a modernist aesthetics of shock. For Benjamin (1973: 157–202, 162–172), it was modern urban living, rather than the battlefield, that became the source of these invading stimuli. Benjamin saw Charles Baudelaire's poetry as an attempt by the city poet to parry shock and to prevent it from sinking into the unconscious, where in its unbound condition it could be revived as nightmare or as involuntary memory. In reproducing the shock experience in Hazel's move from Eastrod to Taulkinham, O'Connor situates her work within the modernist tradition of Benjamin's aesthetic.[10] When Hazel first enters the city, his battlefield training has primed him to anticipate the signs: "PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically. [...] His head turned to one side and then the other, first toward one sign and then the other" (O'Connor 1988: 15). But, for O'Connor it would seem, these Benjaminian shock stimuli are made to point toward or subserve a greater invasive stimulus: the threat of Christian revelation. One arresting feature of *Wise Blood* is its use of evangelistic signs calling out for repentance, a common feature of the Bible-Belt South. O'Connor makes some of these

[10] O'Connor most probably was not familiar with Benjamin or his observations on Baudelaire (the latter were not translated into English until 1968). But she intuitively understood the modernist aesthetics of shock and knew Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire's early master in this aesthetic, from childhood (O'Connor 1988: 911).

Christian warning signs very similar to the advertising ones, even down to their aggressive capital letters. Hazel passes a sign saying "Jesus Died for YOU" just before meeting the patrolman who destroys his car (O'Connor 1988: 117).

Walter Benjamin on Modern Experience as Shock

The question of how O'Connor uses the modernist introduction of urban shock experience into literature is one that goes to the heart of how *Wise Blood* is interpreted. Myka Tucker-Abramson offers a highly original reading of *Wise Blood* based on Benjamin's analysis of shock experience, but she adapts this analysis to the postwar experience of the South. The rural South was becoming urbanized in the years 1945 to 1962 and cities such as Atlanta were turning into post-segregational centres of consumption. One illuminating example Tucker-Abramson refers to is that when Hazel, soon after his arrival in Taulkinham, receives instructions from a police officer about how to respond to traffic signals. Benjamin (1973: 177) had called response to traffic signals part of the "complex kind of training" that the "human sensorium" has to negotiate to become an acculturated urban being. This policeman gives a postwar southern twist to this training by informing Hazel, whose jaywalking he presumes to be that of a clueless rube, that traffic signals are race-blind (O'Connor 1988: 24). Tucker-Abramson (2017: 1171) argues that it is Hazel's political education through urban shock that allows him to move from the white rural poverty of Eastrod into the neo-liberal Atlanta that was created by its major, William Hartsfield. For Tucker-Abramson, the theological component of the novel – its God shock – serves only as an allegory of the social predicament of the southern white working class, which fled from the country to city between the late 1940s and the 1960s. Her case is very perceptive, but it perhaps does not fully circumvent the difficulty that whenever O'Connor mentions shock she connects its use with her theological intentions. For example, O'Connor wrote in "The Fiction Writer and His Country" (1957): "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock" (O'Connor 1988: 805–806). If the value of shock is principally, as Tucker-Abramson (2017: 1168) claims, to point to an underlying "political unconscious" in the work, then it is hard to account for some other examples in O'Connor's fiction where its appearance is harshly eschatological and doesn't seem to be concerned with the process of the acculturation of the southern working class to the neoliberal city. At the end of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for example, the Misfit says that the dead grandmother missed sainthood (the difficult goodness of the title) because there was no-one there to shoot her all the time: "She would have been a good woman […] if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (O'Connor 1988: 153). While the Misfit means that a woman can only be "good" in his sexist sense that she needs to be restrained by (male) violence, the narrator of the story is making an equation between God's presence and shock experience. God as shock disciplines and curbs the sinful ego, leading it to the deepest sense of goodness.

"Violence," O'Connor (1969: 112) writes, "is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace."

O'Connor and the Theology of Shock

One could argue, therefore, that O'Connor distinguishes a third type of shock in addition to the war trauma of Freud and the urban stimuli of Benjamin. This is the shock of God's sudden intrusions into the secular world. In O'Connor's writing these three types of shock interact: urban and psychoanalytic shock shade into the theological. It is remarkable how closely O'Connor follows Freud's model of war neurosis in establishing her own theological variation upon it.[11] O'Connor's Catholicism meant, of course, that Freud's atheism and materialism put him in the enemy camp, but her statements in her letters about Freud show a sly willingness to adapt his economy of psychological processes for her own creative purposes. In a letter of 1955 O'Connor (1980: 110) writes: "As to Sigmund, I am against him tooth and toenail but I am crafty; never deny, seldom confirm, always distinguish. Within his limitations I am ready to admit certain uses for him." One of these "uses" is that of Freud's repetition compulsion: what results in *Wise Blood* is a strange theological version of this compulsion. Hence Hazel treats the very possibility of Mrs Hitchcock having Christian belief as though it were a potential recurrence of his childhood encounters with religion and these, in turn, are modelled on battlefield trauma of war neurosis.[12] In the bunk of the train Hazel remembers the burials of his grandfather, his father, his brother, and his mother. But he does not so much remember as compulsively repeat these experiences, merging with the scene of trauma as he conceives of the bunk as a coffin. The theological element in this compulsive repetition comes out because what for Hazel is ultimately traumatic in the burial of his relatives is not the thought that death might be final, but the thought that it might not be final – that the hand of his grandfather or father might rise from the coffin. Hazel even sees his mother leaving her coffin as a "huge bat" (O'Connor 1988: 14). The threat in the darkness that Hazel confronts is not that of nonexistence, but one in which Jesus lurks, "a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark" (O'Connor 1988: 11).

The original childhood trauma of the intrusive Christ, which spreads over Hazel's entire life, occurs when his preacher grandfather said that even for Hazel, a "mean sinful unthinking boy [...] Jesus would die ten million deaths before He would let him lose his soul" (O'Connor 1988: 11). A recent analyst of trauma, Cathy Caruth, is helpful in showing how the narrative organization of this extension in trauma might work in *Wise Blood*. In Freud's descriptions of war neurosis, Caruth explains, there is a structure of delay. The original wound is "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly" to be fully known and then has to be re-known in the nightmares of the survivor. In the double staging of the

[11] Freud is often mentioned in O'Connor's letters. In one letter O'Connor (1988: 1175) writes, "I really have quite a respect for Freud when he isn't made into a philosopher."

[12] Freud aligns four kinds of trauma that go "beyond the pleasure principle": war trauma; childhood games; adult experiences of a malicious fatality; and experience of childhood trauma in psychoanalytic patients. War trauma is the original example on which others are modelled.

wound, Caruth (1996: 3–4) observes, Freud is "interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing." The time between the original wound and its impact is the in-between position of Hazel Motes, a "Christian *malgré lui*" who knows of the truth of Christ and denies it (O'Connor 1988: 1265). So much of Hazel's compulsive behaviour in Taulkinham, such as his pursuit of the preacher Asa Hawkes and his copying of Hawkes's act of self-blinding, is on the track of this re-knowing of an original wound.

Hazel's pursuit of Hawkes suggest a "knowing" that, like that of Enoch Emery, is in his "blood" (O'Connor 1988: 45). It is an instinctual form of knowing and, as Freud (1955: 35) said of manifestations of the repetition compulsion, gives "the appearance of some "daemonic" force at work." Both Enoch and Hazel are driven by this "wise blood," this biologism of religious longing, to divine ends. When Enoch sheds his old self, that of an anonymous city dweller, and dons a gorilla suit, "[n]o gorilla in existence […] was happier at this moment than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it" (O'Connor 1988: 112).

It is particularly in Hazel's last days as he moves towards a zero of absolute darkness that there seems to be a divine end as the purpose of his life. By this time all of Hazel's attempts to master religious trauma retroactively are unsuccessful and he descends into a state of radical breakdown, living as a blind man at the home of Mrs. Flood, his landlady. Freud argued that the failure to bind trauma allows the death drive to push the organism toward a condition of total quiescence. O'Connor depicts Hazel's final days as those of a person who has undergone a radical collapse of the organism: this is the ultimate resting point of his war trauma.[13] When the patrolman destroys Hazel's car, this shock is so devastating that Hazel blinds himself. Finally two policemen beat Hazel to death with their truncheons at the very end of the novel. Paradoxically, however, this radical breakdown of the ego benefits Hazel spiritually because it allows for the Christian ontological reconstruction of his self. In the larger comparison that the novel makes between the post-traumatic life of a soldier and a narrative of religious redemption there is a similar place of ending: the asymmetric force of total war or of God bear down on the frail body and bring about its neurological collapse. This means that Hazel is rather a citizen-saint of a South that has been involved in a global war rather than Myka Tucker-Abramson's thriving sociological persona within the neo-liberal southern city (Hazel does not finally survive within the private space of Mrs Flood's home as would be the logical outcome of his being saved by the state in Tucker-Abramson's model; his education in shock ends in death).[14]

[13] Stefanos Geroulanos and Todd Meyers (2018: 76) argue that Freud's analysis of war trauma fits into the larger view held by doctors of the First World War on the body's response to wounding and shell-shock. These doctors thought that "[b]ecause of the perforation, shock subjects the organism to a kind of ecstatic displacement of itself and turns the response to the intruding other into internal self-destruction."

[14] Geroulanos and Meyers (2018: 77) argue that the medical model that the military doctors and Freud had of the body being overwhelmed by shock, and then destroying itself, followed a "logic inherent in aggressive total war: the anguish of being pierced through by the enemy and crumbling as a result of one's own highly complex, integrated organization."

Karl Barth, War, and the Absolute Otherness of God

Where did O'Connor's association between the manifestations of the wholly other God and neurobiological mechanisms of shock come from? Part of her use of this association came down to a uniquely private religious-aesthetic complex in her writing. But this private sensibility does have a context in the interwar history of theological ideas. For the association can be found in the crisis theology of German Protestant theologian Karl Barth, particularly in his commentary on Paul in *The Epistle to the Romans* (second edition, 1922). O'Connor (1983: 164–165), like many other Catholic readers such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, was an enthusiastic reader of Barth. She said of one of his works: "There is little or nothing in this book that the Catholic cannot recognize as his own."[15] Barth's (1933: 355) argument in *Epistle to the Romans* was that God was wholly different from the human and could be not understood through human knowledge or culture. There was an "infinite qualitative distinction" between man and God. To bridge this gap, God employs a power that is overwhelming and that has no definition outside itself. Barth (1933: 71) goes to the First World War for a military imagery that brings out God's "aggressive incursion into the world." To Barth (1933: 29, 268, 190, 290), God appears in the world as a vertical intervention like "the crater made at the percussion point of an exploding shell" (Barth 1933: 29). He is a "bomb" (Barth 1933: 268), an "assault upon men" (Barth 1933: 190), and his "[e]xplosions are the inevitable consequences of our bringing infinity within the range of concepts fitted only for the apprehension of what is finite" (Barth 1933: 290). At several points in her fiction O'Connor also presents God as leading a military assault on the unbeliever. In "Greenleaf" (1956), Mrs May dreams of how the sun "burst through the tree line in the shape of a bullet," a prefiguration of the divine bull that will gore her (O'Connor 1988: 519). Hazel has been the recipient of this bullet: when he looks at his reflection in the glass case that contains the mummy in the museum, his eyes appear as "two clean bullet holes" (O'Connor 1988: 56).

Not only did Barth go to the trenches for theological imagery, but his whole crisis theology had been created in response to the First World War. The fervent assent of German liberal theology to German war aims at the beginning of the war was a great disappointment to Barth and this expressed itself in his work on Paul as a scathing contempt for anthropomorphic approximations to God.[16] O'Connor inherits Barth's war rhetoric and like him mobilizes a shock theology, although she brings this theology to bear upon the Second World War rather than the First. She wants to clear the field so that God and person face one another, the former transmitting violent waves of force to the latter. One of Barth's (1933: 49) favourite metaphors for this clearing of space between man and God is

[15] In a letter of 1958 she says that "the Crisis theologians" Barth and Paul Tillich probably surpass any contemporary Catholic thinkers (O'Connor 1988: 1082).

[16] A harsh critique of intermediaries that build a bridge from man to God—whether this bridge takes the form of sentimental religion, human culture, the officialdom of the Church, or pity for "the Child"—can be found in Barth's (1933: 50) *Epistle to the Romans:* "[I]f the experience of religion is more than a void, or claims to contain or to possess or to 'enjoy" God, it is a shameless and abortive anticipation of that which can proceed from the unknown God alone."

the desert: the searcher for God, he said, must cross "the desert barrier." Perhaps this action of clearing is one of the reasons why O'Connor specifically makes Hazel fight in a war in the desert; why her landscapes so often have a chastened, stripped-down appearance; and why she wants to pour a sour descriptive acid onto so many of the objects of her world. Hazel's "rat-coloured" car is one brilliant example: as well as conveying a repellent ordinariness, it perhaps suggests "desert rats," the name of British soldiers in the North African campaign (O'Connor 1988: 38).[17]

What happens after the shell of God explodes? Stephen Webb (1991: 69), in his book on Barth, comments of this shell: "After the explosion, there is nothing left. The only sign of God's activity is this emptiness or nothingness that unveils the essence of human activity." O'Connor (1980: 427) echoed this remark in a letter: "I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves in a kind of blasting annihilating light, a blast that will last a lifetime." This emptiness or merely negative trace of God is reflected in the representation of Hazel's inner consciousness in the final pages of the book. Hazel blinds himself, walks on stones and wears barbed wire around his chest. His only reason he gives for such actions is that he does this "[t]o pay" (O'Connor 1988: 125). The nature of his inner state is not described from within and seems nearly, but not quite, inaccessible to Mrs. Flood's external observation. When she looks into the "dark tunnel" of Hazel's eye sockets at the very end of the book, she can only imagine him walking toward a "pin prick of light" (O'Connor 1988: 131). That pin prick, however, makes all the difference.

Hazel as Denizen of the Post-War South

The blankness and ineffability of Hazel's spiritual state at the end of the book correlates with the abstraction of the landscapes he inhabits. Hazel's drama of salvation takes place in a post-Second World War South that has been incorporated into a globalized space. Hazel's participation in the war points toward a different kind of embedded-ness in spatial environment from that which was appropriate to the earlier, more neo-Confederate South. For Hazel's South of the late 1940s is one that Faulkner (1997: 638) said had been absorbed, as a result of the Second World War, into "one nation, one world" (*Requiem for a Nun* [1951]); it is a de-territorialized region of highways, consumer goods, and cinemas.[18] This is a South that has been largely drained of its regional sense of place and Civil War history. Hazel has an acute sense of how the topography of the South has been emptied out. He bitterly regrets the loss of his rural "home" in Eastrod and tells Mrs Hitchcock on the train: "You might as well go one place as another" (O'Connor 1988: 6). He incorporates

[17] The original "Desert rats" were the 7th Armoured Division of the British forces in North Africa, who had this name from February 1940. Later in 1941 Nazi propaganda applied the contemptuous term "rats" to the Allied defenders of Tobruk, Libya against Rommel's forces (apart from the British, the "rats" also included Australians, Poles and Indians). These defenders then took the name "the Rats of Tobruk" as an honorific. See https://www.britannica.com/topic/Desert-Rats-World-War-II [02.04.2024].

[18] Tucker-Abramson relates Hazel's attachment to his car to Mayor William Hartsfield's highway construction programme in postwar Atlanta (1179 fn 6).

his sense of homelessness into the atheistic creed of the Church Without Christ, telling the listening crowd: "Where is there a place for you to be? No place" (O'Connor 1988: 93). It is quite appropriate that Hazel's car can serve both as his home and his pulpit within this placeless and merely transitional geography. "I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me," he tells the man who sells him the car (O'Connor 1988: 41). Another of O'Connor's drifting modern heretics is Mr Shiftlet, the Second World War veteran, from "The Life You Save Could Be Your Own." Shiftlet's particular form of heresy was described by Eric Voegelin in *The New Science of Politics* (1953) as a contemporary Gnosticism, an adherence to abstract knowledge or spirituality divorced from the materiality of incarnation. Shiftlet tells the mother of the daughter he abducts: "the spirit, lady, is like an automobile: always on the move, always" (O'Connor 1988: 179). This homogenous new South matches well O'Connor's literary style. It is a style that gets across the poverty of content and deadened spatiality of this southern space. When Hazel looks out of the train window, he views lifeless, desiccated perspectives: "the plowed fields curved and faded"; the hogs "looked like large spotted stones"; and an inflamed sun sits "on the edge of the furthest woods" (O'Connor 1988: 3).

But the implications of this landscape cut in two directions: on the one hand, it suggests a secular waste that had become a commonplace complaint of postwar southern writing, but on the other, it fits in with the figures of theological desertification that Barth and O'Connor favoured. O'Connor's late story "Parker's Back" demonstrates these two directions. O.E. Parker is a serviceman who, like Hazel, is attuned to the re-arranged and quantified space of a fully administered South. But such a space has eventually for Parker a redemptive potential. O'Connor observes, "Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion" (O'Connor 1988: 661). Following the examples of the navy and the government, religion—the curious, but logical, third term in the sequence—is indeed "after" Parker: God throws a thunderbolt at his tractor as he ploughs a field and he has a tattoo of a Byzantine Christ drawn on his back as a sign of his conversion. But God's seizure of Parker is already implicit in the threat of those desert-like "[l]ong views."

Before Hazel can be seized by God, he must confront the threat of the false intermediary that Barth had described, particularly the permutations of this intermediary that, as O'Connor saw it, had emerged after the Second World War. Such an intermediary is seen in Onnie Jay Holy, the fraud who tries to turn Hazel's church into a sellable example of pop religiosity (he once took part in a radio programme called "Soulsease, a quarter hour of Mood, Melody, and Mentality") (O'Connor 1988: 88). Holy has no need of God, only of an autonomous human affectivity that is vaguely informed by the sentiment of the divine: "The unredeemed are redeeming themselves and the new jesus is at hand!" he proclaims (O'Connor 1988: 94). Holy comes directly out of O'Connor's theological interpretation of World War Two, and specifically of the Holocaust, because of his use of "tenderness" as a sales pitch.[19] Holy claims that Hazel's church can release the "natural sweetness" that a child is born with and which is lost in growing up (O'Connor 1988: 85). Such invocations

[19] O'Connor was acutely attuned to the event of the Holocaust. "I've always been haunted by the boxcars," O'Connor wrote in a letter of 1963, in which she said she was reading Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (O'Connor 1988: 1193).

of pity are harshly critiqued in O'Connor's "A Memoir of Mary Ann" (1961), her memoir of an ill child. "[W]e weep over dying children," she says, "because we lack the hard, visionary faith of "other ages" [...]. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness [Christ], its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber" (O'Connor 1988: 830–831)[20]. Rejected by Hazel, Holy sets up a church that is a sentimentalized imitation of the Church Without Christ and hires a physical duplicate of Hazel, Solace Layfield, as its preacher. Before Hazel can confront the wholly absolute God, he must get rid of his humanistic double. Hazel runs Layfield over, an act that is obviously immoral and yet is a necessary part of the Barthian theological war on the intermediary. It is as though the rhetoric of battlefield shock revealed in Barth's work can authorize the violence of such acts of theological correction.

The God that Hazel confronts in the final section is a wholly Other and apophatic God who is best approached in blindness and darkness. Hazel tells Mrs. Flood, "If there's no bottom in your eyes, they hold more" (O'Connor 1988: 126). Darkness and nothingness are terms from which O'Connor extracts a rich multivalence as she slides between their atheistic and apophatic meanings. Hazel in the war "converted to nothing" when fellow soldiers tell him he doesn't have any "soul" (O'Connor 1988: 12). This atheistic "nothing" becomes the founding concept of Hazel's Church Without Christ, a founding concept that takes definition from the post-war popularity in the U.S. of the French existentialists (particularly Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre). But Hazel's "no bottom in your eyes" is a different kind of emptiness to this secular version: it is an emptiness that – through the paradox of the apophatic – manages to "hold more."

"Nothing" was the aim of Freud's death drive, a drive that Freud related to the organism's failure to bind an earlier battlefield shock experience. Yet in Hazel, O'Connor creates an example of war neurosis for whom battlefield trauma overlaps with a more primordial trauma than that Freud describes: that of God's intrusive presence. Both Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* were direct responses to the First World War, but for all their similarity in their treatment of battlefield shock, these are works that reach different conclusions on the insufficiency of the human that this war revealed. O'Connor reflects on this difference. For if the end-point of Hazel's repetition compulsion is death at the hands of the two policemen, then this condition is not quite the same as the tensionless state of pre-existence for which Freud's organism strives. In Freud's case, the individual organism has achieved its purpose and rests at this point of zero tension. But although O'Connor presents Hazel at this end-point as someone reduced by God's tactics of shock to a non-self, this condition is the site where a new Christian ontology of self can begin.

In conclusion, this article has made the case that Hazel Motes is a veteran of Operation Torch in North Africa. Hazel, as with many combatants in this arena of the Second World War, suffers from shell-shock. Shell-shock had already been analyzed by thinkers in the 1920s and 1930s, such as Freud and Benjamin: for them, shock typified the new structure of experience within early twentieth-century modernity (especially in total war and in the

[20] As a historical proposition it is misguided to claim that Hitler and Himmler initiated genocide because they had too much tenderness and wept over children. But this overstatement is the result of O'Connor's ferocious theology, which wants to tear down any possibility of a humanistic substitute for the stark God-human relation.

city). Flannery O'Connor's aesthetics of shock are modelled on this modern structure of experience described by Freud and Benjamin. Hazel's compulsiveness and aggressive verbal parrying replicates similar behaviour that Freud observed in the delayed response to war trauma or that Benjamin analyzed in the literary response of Baudelaire to the new sensations of the city. Likewise Hazel's descent into extinction in the last two chapters shows the predominance in war trauma of what Freud called the death drive. What is noteworthy in O'Connor's aesthetics of shock, however, is her wresting of these secular models in a theological direction. Here her inspiration might have been Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. For Barth, war imagery was a way of framing the absolute difference of God from humankind and he often depicted God's relation to man as a military assault. As a theologian, Barth closely matched O'Connor's special literary sensibility. The jolts of circumstance, the warring contraries, and the volte face conversions of character that critics note in O'Connor's "imagination of extremity"[21] can partly be traced to her inclusion of the diagnosis and theorization of war shock in her fiction, notably in *Wise Blood*.

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[21] See Asals 1982.

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