

ASEBL JOURNAL

Good Books

Selected Poems of Thomas Merton (1967 New Directions Books).

Three by Flannery O'Connor: Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away, Everything That Rises Must Converge (1983 Signet Classic).

Lolita. Vladimir Nabokov. 2nd ed. (1997 Random House).

New Books

Pain and Memory: Reflections on the Strength of the Human Spirit in Suffering, ed. Gregory F. Tague (2009 Editions Bibliotekos). Creative literature.

Origins of English Dramatic Modernism, 1870-1914, eds. Daniel Meyer-Dinkgräfe and Gregory F. Tague (2010 Academica Press). Scholarship.

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## Philosopher of Note

*Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*. Michel Foucault. ed. Paul Rabinow (1997 New Press).

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## Ethical and Ontological Intersections in Flannery O'Connor and Thomas Merton by Robert LeBlanc

Countless literary figures have viewed the page as an ideal site for radical political engagement as they have sought to critique perceived injustices and point to more ethical paths. These writers have often addressed the pressing political issues of their eras through the introduction into discourse of specific subjects that present themselves on the page as protagonists, minor characters, or poetic voices. These writers of literature challenge readers to attend to political exigencies by suggesting

that these voices evoke a being in the space of the work, a being with ontological priorities that can reveal to readers new possibilities for ethical engagement.

These processes of ontological evocation and articulation of an ethics can only be successful, of course, if readers are drawn to encounter these subject positions with the seriousness that they bring to their own ethical decision-making processes. I hope that in this essay, I might offer some considerations of the work of two radical writers of the Cold War era,

fiction writer Flannery O'Connor and poet Thomas Merton. My current research on these writers examines their specific efforts to call into discursive presence the figure of the American Christian leftist, whose radical political engagement is brought about by and within his or her self-affiliation with the religion most practiced by American conservatives. These Christian subjects construct and deconstruct themselves on the page, effacing their discursive presences where they deem necessary and carefully negotiating their

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"Immoral Analysis" - putting aesthetics on trial, an essay on *Lolita* by Naomi Krupitsky Wernham. Page 5.

CALL For Creative Works (short prose and poetry): Following the successful publication of the literary anthology *Pain and Memory* (2009), Editions Bibliotekos is

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associations and disassociations with other markers of Christian belief and practice. They often engage with the struggles that inhere to a project of radical self-fashioning just as they engage with external social and political events. But can a discursive presence that evokes this ontological priority of self-care still address readers, given its placement against the context of a vast network of deeply-entrenched disciplinary power structures? Or is a Christian leftist voice in American literature doomed by its own silences?

This latter doom would appear to have been avoided at least at a superficial level by the Christian left's insistence during the past century on turning to the literary to explore its ethical textures and sense of self. O'Connor and Merton are just two among a readily-connected field of poets, essayists, and novelists who registered the Christian leftist voice into literary discourse of roughly the 1940s-1980s and who (in a number of cases) became close friends and partners in activism and radical publication. Affiliated Christian leftist writers include the poets Denise Levertov and Daniel Berrigan, essayists Philip Berrigan and Ammon Hennacy, and novelist/essayist/activist Dorothy Day, best known as co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement in the 1930s. Day also sought to articulate the ethical struggles of the Christian left within novels such as the all-but-forgotten *The Eleventh Virgin*, and in her widely-read memoir *The Long Loneliness*. In most cases, these literary texts turn inward toward explorations of ontology before later bringing these explorations to bear on ethical considerations. I will offer some close readings of the work of O'Connor and Merton now to map out the ways in which this handling of ethics shapes these texts differently across prose and poetic forms.

O'Connor's 1952 novel *Wise Blood* is known for its depiction of a heretical preacher named Hazel Motes, who travels the Southern countryside preaching his "Church Without Christ" (54) for much of the novel. In the novel's penultimate chapter, Hazel abruptly shifts from an outspoken opponent of Christian practice to a taciturn ascetic who blinds himself with quicklime to atone for his past sins (108). His rapid conversion to a radical Christian subjectivity is depicted starkly, with no explanation from the plaintive narrative voice of the text, and accompanied only by Hazel's refusal to interact with his community despite their passing interest in his stunning acts of asceticism. This protagonist's ethical project is depicted as accompanied by a withdrawal of sorts from discursive presence, but that withdrawal does not culminate in a total erasure or shutting-out of Christian radical voices within the text.

The novel's final chapter interests me the most. We find Hazel living a purgatorial existence as a blind ascetic alongside his increasingly doting landlady, Mrs. Flood (112). Mrs. Flood takes on the novel's most evidently political role as an embodiment of both conservative thought of the era and of the corruption that inheres to disciplinary power structures. In a paragraph where her thoughts seep into the third-person narration, she offers her assessment of welfare programs of the era. We learn that Mrs. Flood "felt that the money she paid out in taxes returned to all the worthless pockets in the world, that the government not only sent it to foreign niggers and a-rabs, but wasted it at home on blind fools and on every idiot who could sign his name on a card" (110). Her conservative sense of the ethical contrasts with Hazel's formative radical ethics throughout this odd final chapter.

Hazel appears largely apathetic to his landlady's companionship, though he accompanies her at meals and on the front porch of Mrs. Flood's boarding house. We learn that Mrs. Flood intends to marry him so she might benefit financially from his estate after his death or institutionalization (117). She appears unaware of the ethical

conundrum that this would instantiate; Hazel, on the other hand, may or may not have observed her designs on his financial assets and civil liberties, but he certainly informs us that he wouldn't be troubled by her ethical shortcomings. He offers her free access to his "leftover" funds at the end of each month (114), quietly pointing up that his ethical concerns as a self-fashioning ascetic overwhelm any exigency of teaching her a political lesson about greed and materialism. His new life is entirely devoid of preaching in any traditional sense, but his responses to her prying questions indicate that he has a new perspective on Christian practice.

In one exchange, Hazel informs Mrs. Flood that her agnosticism is a preferable accompaniment to her amoral ways than would be a hypocritical Christian practice. Mrs. Flood boasts that she is "as good...not believing in Jesus as many a one that does," and Hazel replies, "You're better," noting with some degree of sarcasm and muted distaste for her ethics, "If you believed in Jesus, you wouldn't be so good" (114). Hazel dies without fanfare at the conclusion of the novel, ostensibly before Mrs. Flood can rob him of his financial assets, but the novel's final statement takes readers away from this final ethico-political subplot about her corruption and toward a final reconsideration of Hazel's ontology. He died with a limited degree of discursive presence, but the novel's end does grant a great deal of discursive attention to his ethical project by dramatizing his conversion to a new ethical standpoint rooted in ascetic Christian practice. Additionally, Hazel's few semi-public remarks after his abandonment of the Church Without Christ point to his embrace of a new Christian ethical practice rooted in concern for self-care and far more limited political agency. His effacement of discursive presence allows him to whittle down his engagement with ethical matters to a bare minimum, but yet it is this bare minimum that presents the novel's final ethical exigency to readers, who are left to consider the ethico-political questions raised in the wake of Hazel's challenge and exposure of the corruption of Mrs. Flood.

In her recent text on ethics entitled *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler observes, "The refusal to narrate remains a relation to narrative and to the scene of address" (12). These Christian leftist texts that I am considering find the radical ethical subject effacing and deconstructing its discursive presence, but not abandoning the literary text as the site of ethical work or explorations of the ethical altogether. Flannery O'Connor maintained a lengthy correspondence with a fellow Christian leftist writer named Thomas Merton, and a consideration of his poetry can enable my argument to explore further this idea that the Christian leftist subject can engage ethical concerns through an inward and self-effacing turn enacted on the printed page. With his embrace of confessional poetry in the 1960s, Merton found himself facing tough ethical questions of his era through reflections on what it meant to simultaneously be Christian *and* be radical, without either descriptor undoing the other.

Just as O'Connor's fiction gives a discursive presence to voices of the Christian left that concern themselves with radical modes of self-fashioning, Merton's poetry gives voice to a sense of leftist urgency that is interested in continually exploring its own emerging being. However, these negotiations back and forth between "external" political engagement and "internal" articulation of ethical subject positions are of course differently textured in poetic texts than prose texts. We can see Merton opening up a line of ethical engagement in his sustained consideration of political issues of his era, such as American military involvement in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement. A close reading of his poem "Night-Flowering Cactus" will enable a critique of his introduction of a project of self-fashioning into the context of ongoing political engagements.

The poem gives voice to the title cactus in order to explore the difficult urgency of truth-telling in a desert-like setting: “I neither show my truth nor conceal it / My innocence is described dimly / Only by divine gift / As a white cavern without explanation” (127). Merton places the effaced voice of the Christian activist into discourse in the person of this night-flowering cactus to enable an articulation of the specific texture of radical agency that it pursues. Merton’s use of the linebreak accords with the method advocated by his friend and contemporary Denise Levertov when she writes of “alogical pauses the linebreak records” (79), and his evocation of this subject position in the poem suggests the careful agon of its self-fashioning.

This poem’s reflections on possible discursive presences for a radical ethical voice admit to an inevitable set of limits on that voice just as they articulate its coming-into-discourse. This set of limits is rooted in Merton’s acknowledgment of the historical and the temporal, but these limits are also the traced contours of a recognizably Christian voice that would also assert a radical political engagement. The speaker insists on an identity rooted in “wrought passion” but also effaces its agency as bearer of discourse: “When I open once for all my impeccable bell / No one questions my silence: / The all-knowing bird of night flies out of my mouth” (127). This silence that is seen by Merton to await beyond all political discourse goes unquestioned as the accepted endpoint of the voice’s engagement with its audience, but its radical engagement with that audience (“once for all”) was also a necessary step in its achievement of “purity” (127).

Merton’s confessional poetry experiments constantly with voice in the poetic text, showing dissatisfaction with unbridled discursive presences that refuse to acknowledge the failures of past radicalities. His poetic voice negotiates an engagement with political exigencies on the one hand, while always insisting on the voice’s careful positioning among a network of recognized Christian identities on the other hand, often within the span of a few lines. This negotiation of a subject position within poetic texts enables Merton to engage ethical issues while simultaneously reflecting on issues of identity and concern for the self. In this way, the Christian leftist voice in recent American poetry lays bare its ethical challenges as internally experienced, whereas similar voices within fiction texts (such as Hazel Motes’ late ascetic expressions) are presented to readers in structures that dramatize the discursive presences of these subjects within landscapes that seek their silence and demise.

In an interview on ethical self-care, Michel Foucault suggested that “to seek one’s salvation definitely means to take care of oneself. But the condition required for attaining salvation is precisely renunciation” (289). My research into the ethical valences of Christian leftist literary texts has shown that this condition that Foucault mentions for attainment of salvation in fact creates openings wherein writers like O’Connor and Merton have explored radical ontologies of the self. The ethical subject positions pursued within and through these poetry and fiction texts are advanced toward discursive focus in such ways as to call attention to processes of becoming radical and becoming Christian. In this way, these texts challenge the reader’s structuralist notions of subjectivity, just as the subjectivities expressed within them engage ethical challenges that resonate with the reader politically.

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Immoral Analysis
by Naomi Krupitsky Wernham

An unopened book is full of potential – inside, one assumes, awaits an entire world. The reader hopes to be consumed by the characters and events in a novel, to be carried away by their story. We read for many reasons; we read for distraction, for enlightenment, for entertainment, but ultimately, most readers are looking for a world that they can *believe* in. The question, then, becomes where this belief in and attachment to a fictional world (characters, events, setting) stems from; whether this belief evolves from a gut, emotional reaction to a text, or whether it stems from a careful analysis of the events and characters illustrated in the text – how does a reader “get the most” out of a book?

Nabokov's *Lolita* illustrates this conflict particularly aptly. It is written in beautiful, undoubtedly aesthetically pleasing language, but its subject matter – pedophilia – is generally considered to be so awful that no amount of flowery language could render the action justifiable. However, a reader's initial emotional response wouldn't take context – in this case, the reader's moral compass, which probably informs him/her that pedophilia is disgusting – into account. That first response is a pure reaction to the aesthetics of the piece, to the beautifully constructed sentences and precise diction. As soon as the reader adds his/her own context to the mix, that emotional response gets thrown by the wayside and replaced with a more logical, critical analysis that makes compartmentalizing Humbert Humbert's actions, and distancing oneself from them, far easier. However, it also allows for a deeper understanding of the book on an intellectual level. *Lolita*, however, seeks to unnerve the reader *emotionally*. Whether the reader's analysis of Nabokov's *Lolita* condemns the book or immortalizes it, one must consider the emotional distance created by the act of analysis and recognize that both the original emotional reaction to a piece and the subsequent analysis are valid, but entirely different, forms of experiencing a book.

Nabokov begins *Lolita* with a poetic, celebratory tone, glorifying Lolita as the “light of [his] life, fire of [his] loins,” and goes on to express the tactile beauty inherent in Lolita's very name, describing “the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.” (Nabokov, 9). By

showing the reader the all-consuming sensuality *Lolita* represents for the narrator, Nabokov engages the reader's trust and – maybe – sympathy for Humbert Humbert. His language is pleasing; it rolls off the tongue in a pleasantly alliteration-heavy way, and the reader most probably *enjoys* these words initially.

However, the book is legendary enough that most readers know its associations with pedophilia before they begin reading; they begin, then, with moral hackles raised and ethical barriers reinforced to the highest degree. Because the reader is aware that his morals are about to be compromised, he will analyze even the most poetic aspects of the story as he reads, distancing himself from the *emotional* reaction Nabokov's language is intended to provoke. It is hard for the reader to have the same emotional reaction knowing that even the very opening of the novel is written from the perspective of someone the reader feels is so morally reprehensible – even a reader who makes a conscious *choice* to try to go with the language of the novel, ignoring any preconceived judgments he/she may have, is, in a sense, *analyzing* his/her reaction. In choosing to have a reaction, the reader loses an aspect of that reaction – the moment where the reader realizes he/she has been tricked and has to re-align his/her moral compass to accommodate the mistake. He/she loses an element, then, of what Nabokov is attempting to provoke – the purely sensory experience of beautiful language and writing without interpretation.

When reading any novel, but especially one written as eloquently as *Lolita*, it is reasonable to assume that the author is attempting to provoke some reaction in the reader – in the case of *Lolita*, the language is clearly orchestrated in such a way as to invoke the reader's sympathy towards Humbert Humbert – his descriptions of a “nymphet” as “running in the wind, in the pollen and dust, a flower in flight, in the beautiful plain...” don't seem like those of a vicious, corrupt pedophile, but those of a man in awe and in love (Nabokov, 19). The sensible emotional reaction to a sentence such as the one described above is along the lines of “wow, that's really beautiful” – the reader probably thinks this about the language before (whether consciously or not) remembering what this sentence describes.

However, as soon as the reader remembers that he/she is enjoying the descriptions of a pedophile's feelings towards his obsession, the beauty of these words is tainted. The emotional sympathy the reader may have felt towards Humbert Humbert is completely gone, and his transition – the reader's move from sympathy to a feeling of being betrayed by his/her own morality, guilt at having slipped, and renewed disgust at the act described – holds an incredible amount of power. The act of reinforcing one's moral boundaries is proof that Nabokov's words have more power than mere evocation of emotion – the reader is not only caught up in the words, but has to actively

work against them.

This repetitive cycle – enjoyment, guilt, moral retaliation – continues for the duration of the story. It is at its most intense during the more graphic scenes of the novel, notably a surreptitious masturbation scene in which Humbert Humbert “crush[es] out against her left buttock the last throb of the longest ecstasy man or monster had ever known” (Nabokov, 61). The reader follows Humbert’s train of thought and “ecstasy” as he realizes first that “we were fantastically and divinely alone” and goes on to “repeat chance words after her” in hopes of drawing her closer, “while [his] happy hand crept up her sunny leg as far as the shadow of decency allowed” (Nabokov, 60). There is an important *progression* in this scene; Humbert’s attempts to achieve a goal and the clandestine manner in which he must do this create a sense of urgent suspense, and the reader, unconsciously, eggs Humbert on – until Nabokov directly appeals to the readers’ moral sensibilities by reminding him/her that he, Humbert, is not only caressing her “lovely nymphet thigh” but is doing it with a “huge hairy hand” (Nabokov, 60). The stark contrast between the description of Lolita’s vulnerable child thigh and Humbert’s invasive monster hand reminds the reader, again, of the gravity of the situation and the moral atrocities being committed. When Humbert goes on to explain that “there seemed to be nothing to prevent my muscular thumb from reaching the hot hollow of her groin,” the reader can actively assert and use his newfound moral steadfastness, declaring that he/she does *not* condone this and taking satisfaction in his/her moral strength (Nabokov, 61).

Because the story is told exclusively from H.H.’s perspective, Lolita is not portrayed as an innocent 12-year-old girl. She is imbued with ‘nymphet’ qualities; she has a “monkeyish numbleness” and described as “impudent” (Nabokov, 58). In short, Nabokov describes her as a little seductress, for from H.H.’s perspective (whether he is denying the truth to himself or is simply delusional), Lolita is just that – captivating; he is powerless to her charms. H.H. describes a “nymphic echo” that causes a “chill of delight, a leap in [his] loins” (Nabokov, 20). The nymphet is endowed with power over H.H., rendering him almost the *victim* in his relationship with Lolita. The first time he and Lolita have sex, he says “little Lo handled my life in an energetic, manner-of-fact manner as if it were an insensate gadget unconnected with me” (Nabokov, 134). The fact that Lolita is the one doing the “handling” of H.H. exemplifies his feeling of victimization. Even when he achieves his ultimate goal, he feels “handled” rather than in *control*, regardless of the fact that his having sex with Lolita would absolutely be considered rape (which would be, obviously, the most profound representation of *his* power over *her*). Nabokov gives the reader no reason, no textual evidence, for sympathizing with Lolita. Any sympathy the reader feels for Lolita is

inherent in that reader's personal moral compass, which dictates that a 12-year-old girl is never to blame for sexual relations with a man three times her age. Within the context of the novel, though – while the reader is still at a point of sympathizing with Humbert, before Nabokov reminds us or we inadvertently realize what is *really* going on behind the flowery prose – Lolita is in power; she is to blame. Nabokov gives the reader no reason to empathize with her.

It must also be considered that the very act of analyzing these emotional reactions renders them less powerful. Analysis emotionally distances the “analyzer” from the source of the feeling, as it allows feelings to be compartmentalized and categorized and reasoned away. By turning *Lolita* into a work to be written about and analyzed for deeper meaning – in essence, a ‘reason’ for Nabokov’s subject matter, and a reason beyond enjoyment of the novel with which the reader can justify reading it – we diminish a great amount of its power, which lies in the primal reactions it evokes in its readers. Nabokov uses *Lolita* to make a comment about this tendency to analyze – the reader searches and searches for a “reason” why Humbert is the way he is, why he is insane, what *good* can come out of it, and Nabokov gives the reader *nothing*. H.H. exists on a moral plane so far from the readers’ that it’s impossible to reconcile the two; Nabokov challenges the reader to simply *read* and think later. Ultimately, he seemed to be enjoying language – enjoying its power to render even the most reprehensible moral actions beautiful, if only for a moment. And while it is, in some way, tragic that the purity of the reader’s emotional reaction is rendered almost scientific through analysis, it is through that analysis that *Lolita* has been rendered so very timeless and so important to the literary canon. There is value in understanding how such emotional reactions come about; through this comprehension, *Lolita* has gained literary immortality as well as being testament to the incredible power of language. The trick, then, lies in the reader’s acknowledgement that his/her analysis of *Lolita* is not necessarily the most important part of the experience.

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