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Taulkinham's Guardian: The Character of Enoch Emery in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*

Flannery O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* follows the story of Hazel Motes as his journey in the hostile city of Taulkinham transforms him from a defiant defector of the divine to a stoic and resigned blind prophet. For many readers, Hazel's evolution labels him as the sole owner of wise blood in the novel, a conclusion that fails to acknowledge Enoch Emery's obedience to his own innate wisdom. Enoch's bumbling behavior and animalistic drive cause many O'Connor writers and scholars, such as Patrick O'Donnell and Jason C. Lee, to interpret him as little more than a comic simpleton. However, careful analysis reveals that his character is more complex and far-reaching. The wisdom that drives Enoch's actions is not intellectual in nature but is instead based on action and result, situated within what is worldly as opposed to what is spiritual. Enoch therefore becomes Taulkinham's mirror and guardian of hope, the only character capable of conceiving, confronting, and presenting the brokenness of the world around him. This leads Enoch to truths that others cannot see or refuse to acknowledge, and the transformation caused by obedience to his wise blood assigns him the duty of leading others to see these distasteful truths.

Enoch, through his actions, is wise in the ways of humanity. Taulkinham is a wholly grotesque environment and so, according to O'Connor, will "almost of necessity . . . be violent and comic" (816). Enoch's connection to the city is stronger than others', as it is his blood, "his secret blood, [that beats] in the center of the city" (57), and no other character comprehends the issue of the city's preference for quashing people, as Enoch is distressed with his awareness that "all [the people] want to do is knock you down" (26). Because Enoch understands Taulkinham and is linked to it by his blood, the young man, by necessity, must also be violent and comic.

Disconnected from the divine and tethered to the world, Enoch has been called to the city almost as if he were a gatekeeper sent by divine command, stating that “[his] daddy made [him] come” and he “[guards] a gate” at the city zoo (32). By the end of the novel, Enoch becomes a gatekeeper and guardian for the city to which his blood is tied, leading him in a direction that will bring the hope of redemption to a people that have become unresponsive. However, the young man must first grow into this hero, guided by his wise blood, and this growth is, unfortunately for Enoch, reliant on failure. Readers often dismiss this failure as nothing more than humor, but Enoch’s satirical actions are one aspect of his inner wisdom that strives to bring about change.

Some O’Connor scholars, such as Patrick O’Donnell, are quick to label Enoch as nothing more than a humorous foil for Hazel, a character that “plays the role of parodic, bestial Antichrist to Hazel’s scapegoat/savior” (97). O’Connor herself dismissed Enoch’s final purpose as solely humorous, having stated in a letter to Carl Hartman that Enoch’s realization “that being an animal is no fun . . . is just funny” (O’Connor 921). However, there is more to Enoch’s parodic presence than simply humor.

Enoch’s awareness of the cruelty of Taulkinham allows him to act as a passive observer, and his gaze over the people reflects their overall degenerate nature. The young man does not spend his time looking for deeper symbolic meanings. This is an integral part of his wise blood because the city the young man is connected to also neglects the symbolic. However, this does not prevent either party from being presented with symbolic entities that must be interpreted without figurative or spiritual meaning. In the heart of the city lies the museum, interpreted as “muvseevum” by Enoch (55), and although the word produces a shiver, the young man does not try to search for deeper meaning. Enoch’s misreading is a result of a mistake on his own part, his

poor vision or perhaps lack of education, but the sign still holds no meaning. The people of Taulkinham, in their brokenness, would not interpret *muvssevum* and museum differently because there is no need for translation. Similarly, the name of the city is an undetected symbol that would not cause any development were its meaning made known. The people can draw no more significance from their attachment to a location that has a name that sounds like talking ham, that is, a talking pig, than Enoch can from his attachment to the museum. It makes no difference to them either way because a spiritual symbolic would only attempt to draw inward those that have no concept of inner being. Taulkinham's people must first learn to look outward through reflection so that they can see what they are. They must develop a personal gaze, an eye that will reveal to them the corrupted nature of their surroundings. Enoch becomes this more active gaze when he dons the gorilla suit and completes his transformation into proper guardian, but he can only carry out his duty after he has developed an eye of his own.

Enoch's job involves guarding the zoo gate, putting him in a position that allows him to watch animals and people. In the marginally symbolic environment of Taulkinham, the allegorical divide between animal and human is blurred. The Hawks may as well be actual predatory birds and Hoover Shoats is just as much a pig as a man. Miles Orvell states that "Enoch's concerns are with man in his lowest relations – with animals" and that his "greater kinship with his charges" makes him "his brothers' keeper" (87). These statements, however, miss the human aspect that is present in Enoch's actions, brought to light by his worldly wisdom. Enoch is not simply a keeper for animal brethren. He also tends to his fellow man by bringing them what they need for redemption. Jason C. Lee points out that Enoch fetches Hazel the shrunken mummy "as a form of worship and a request for forgiveness" (217). Analyzing this action as a form of reverence for Hazel overlooks the fact that this action was not performed by

Enoch of his own accord. His blood, the part of him that drives him as a representation of the fallen, moves him until he “[finds] himself doing this or that, like a bird finds itself building a nest when it hasn’t actually been planning to” (O’Connor 73). Enoch’s delivery of the mummy is not something he does for himself. Instead, it serves to present Hazel with a depiction of the fallacy he has been preaching, and it is Enoch’s action that ultimately brings about this realization. The wisdom of humanity continues to push Enoch onward until he arrives at the object that morphs him into the city’s proper literal and symbolic guardian.

Because Taulkinham’s population is so desensitized that they cannot respond to spirituality or humor, they must be jarred out of their apathy by force rather than gentleness. A blind city must have its eyes opened to the ugliness that plagues it, and it cannot do this if each individual withdraws further into themselves. Because the city and its people only exist within a worldly context, these entities would be unable to achieve this kind of awareness. Instead, they need to do what Hazel preached to his meager congregation. Taulkinham must “get [its conscience] out in the open and hunt it down and kill it, because it’s no more than your face in the mirror is or your shadow behind you” (94). Enoch is first confronted with this face when he meets Gongga. The young man is the only admirer that approaches the gorilla and proceeds to speak to him, entranced by “the first hand that had been extended to Enoch since he had come to the city” (102). It is fitting that this “warm and soft” hand that greets Enoch belongs to a creature that has “an ugly pair of human [eyes]” that “squinted at Enoch from behind [a] celluloid pair” (102). In this moment, Enoch witnesses the circular pattern of being both the observer and the observed, and Gongga’s two pairs of eyes work so that a third observer is added, watching Enoch as he is being observed. This is the young man’s destiny, his role as ultimate guardian, and this

ugliness that disturbs him is what he must display to the entirety of the city. It is the beast that, if Taulkinham wants redemption, must be confronted and conquered.

Enoch's theft of the gorilla suit is often treated as a comic end to a false hero's journey. Frederick Asals states that the young man's "function in *Wise Blood* is not to preach a secular humanism but to act out its *reductio ad absurdum*" (43). Asals' argument is that Enoch's donning of the Gongga suit is ultimately nothing more than "a form of refutation showing contradictory or absurd consequences following upon premises as a matter of logical necessity" ("Reductio Ad Absurdum"). However, Enoch's transformation serves as more than a contrast to the spiritual aspect of Hazel. The former's becoming Gongga cements him as hopeful guardian of Taulkinham by presenting its people with the image of themselves that they need to confront and subdue. The "black heavier shaggier figure" that "had two heads, one light and one dark," is a result of Enoch's determination to join the gaze of Gongga and extend a warm, desired hand to the rest of Taulkinham (O'Connor 111). Many argue that Enoch's transformation into Gongga results in him "[becoming] a false beast" (Lee 213) that "plunges downward into bestiality [while] Hazel rises upward into a desperate spirituality" (Asals 48). This does not hold true, for Enoch is not simply a false beast or a fallen creature; he has become "THE young man of the future" (O'Connor 108). However, he has never known "the price of his restoration" (820), so while he does not receive the reward he thought would be given to him, it is not true that he fails to go through a positive metamorphosis. His efforts are not in vain. Because Taulkinham is trapped within itself and numb to the spiritual dimension, it must have a guardian that exists within its cage, someone that is just as disconnected from divine transcendence as the city.

After completing his transformation, Enoch attempts to offer his gorilla hand to a young couple viewing the city, and in doing so, reveals their true natures to them through his ugliness.

Instead of confronting the figure before him, the young man abandons the woman he is with, having “eased his arm from around the woman and [disappearing] silently into the woods” while the woman flees in the opposite direction “screaming down the highway” (112). The fate of these characters is unknown, but what is important for them in this moment is that they are faced with a literal and symbolic gaze, Enoch-Gonga, that reveals and reflects their true natures. The people care nothing for each other and cannot face the hideous thing that is seen, sees them, and observes them being seen. This is not humorous for the people, nor is it enjoyable for Enoch, but it is necessary for Taulkinham to build the foundation of redemption. After the encounter, Enoch sits and stares at “the smokestacks and square tops of buildings [that] made a black uneven wall against the lighter sky” (112). He now sees the cage that Taulkinham is, “the uneven skyline of the city” illustrating entrapment (112). This is not, however, a negative thing. While Hazel’s view reflects “the entire distance that [extends] from his eyes to the blank gray sky” and on to space beyond it (118), Enoch’s view is arrested at the figurative bars that entrap Taulkinham. Hazel has moved beyond the city and cannot act as a proper guardian, but the city has become Enoch’s charge. He is trapped with the people of the world so that he can act as their eyes and extend his hand to the people in need of it. They cannot ascend until they have come to an understanding of themselves and their disfigurement. Enoch-Gonga’s rejection, his moment of grace, is not only for himself but for all of Taulkinham. His wise blood does not afford him comfort, but it is his duty to follow it. He must justify his blood because wrestling with the wisdom that has been passed down to him results in nothing but a perfect resignation (79). He has become the new person that he envisioned for himself. He is not a spiritual savior, but he is a guardian that “[doesn’t] look like any other man so [people will] look at him” (80). Just as Enoch had to force himself on to his new personhood, “[snatching] it instead of [receiving] it” (108),

others will be forced to face this ugliness and process it. The man that entered Gongga's vehicle was one step away from finally justifying his worldly wisdom, and the gorilla that emerged is the fruition of his journey. His place is in the world. He cannot offer spiritual salvation, as that exists beyond his realm, outside the cage of the city, but he can force people to face themselves through him and take the first steps needed to understand that redemption is possible.

Diving deeper into Enoch Emery's character reveals that he exists as something entirely different than a humorous foil. His actions, dictated by his wisdom, are worldly and mysterious even to himself, but they guide him to a transformation that presents hope for a nearly hopelessly broken society. As a man that dons the ugliness of a beast, Enoch is capable of forcing the people he encounters to confront an ugliness that they have previously avoided. He is their watcher, but now, he can also force others to see him, a cycle that doubles back so that Taulkinham can see itself. Therefore, while the prophet ascends into the divine sky beyond the world, Enoch, as the only individual fit to lead depraved man, stays trapped within the cage alongside the world's prisoners, bringing a fearful hope for redemption to a people that are blind to their need for it.

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