I The Hermit Novelist

Be solitary, be silent, and be at peace.
—Arsenius, The Sayings of the Desert Fathers

Lord, I'm glad I'm a hermit novelist.
—Flannery O'Connor, The Habit of Being

This book studies the importance of desert life and ascetic spirituality in Flannery O'Connor's fiction. O'Connor's use of this tradition takes us back to late antiquity. About four centuries after Christ, the founding father Anthony the Great and a number of men and women were dissatisfied with the accepted way of Christian life in Greco-Roman culture and withdrew from society to live as hermits alone or in small groups in the nearby desert and mountain crags of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Hermit comes from the Greek eremos, meaning desert. The story of the desert was one of the most lasting creations of the ancient world. It was and remains in the history of spiritual quest a legend of a harsh reality and a glorious ideal.

The aim of the first Christian hermits was simple: to find their true selves that could bring them close to God. The means the hermits employed to reach divine intimacy was correspondingly austere. They fought evil in themselves through rigorous self-scrutiny to clear away the sin that separated them from God. The pitfalls and defeats along with the victories experienced in this inner combat yielded insights that have been for centuries the rich source of spiritual renewal. The practice of these spiritual warriors reached Flannery O'Connor, who wrote to a friend on 16 March 1960: "Those desert fathers interest me very much" (HB 382).
O'Connor's interest in the desert monastics—which did not ebb even as she discovered other subjects, topical and theological—flowers in the course of her artistic development. She found a wisdom in the desert fathers (abbas) and mothers (ammas) that stirred her imagination with possibilities for replenishing our century, the era of T. S. Eliot's waste land and John Barth's artistic exhaustion.

The devastations of the age may be right for solitaries. O'Connor certainly is not the only recent American novelist to tap the roots of asceticism for an antidote to the ills of our time. Others have perceived the desert and have come on their own emphases in its vastness. Two rigorous moralists who share O'Connor's concerns, Walker Percy and Don DeLillo (Desmond, Crossroads 126–34), stand out as bringing the desert tradition newly minted into the final decades of the twentieth century. In Percy's first published novel, The Moviegoer (1961), Binx Bolling discovers in the sawdust of his life the power of self-denial and withdrawal to restore some wholeness within himself. With hope arising from catastrophe, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar in Percy's Lancelot (1977) asserts that "everything will go back to the desert" (32). He should know. His life is one long, barren tract, running from the depravity of his society that leads to confinement in the Institute for Aberrant Behavior and out into the solitude awaiting him. With the guidance of Father John, a self-abnegating priest, Lancelot makes his way by means of confession to the hope of a new life alone in the Blue Ridge Mountains with, perhaps, love. The Thanatos Syndrome (1987) sums up Percy's career by going all the way back to the practice of the primitive monastics as embodied in Father Rinaldo Smith. Smith truly fathers those around him in the lessons of renunciation. Amid the death-dealing of modern science and politics, Smith's selflessness shows the way to renewal. In the end, Father Smith cares for the dry bones of persons dying of HIV. With his death and that of his charges before him, Father Smith lives out a simple honesty and active ministry that revive love.

Don DeLillo depicts the ruins blighting the end of the century. His desert is one of waste and excess. The sources of this refuse are the media—driven by consumerism, greed, terrorism, technology—and the cult of personality. These forces create a capitalist junkyard that is the setting for all of DeLillo's narratives. To protect himself, the rock-star hero Bucky Wunderlick in Great Jones Street (1973) goes into deep seclusion. Isolation shields him from a demanding public and gives him power. The noise in White Noise (1985) is a cacophony of loud, harsh, discordant sounds. The din signals death and rumbles throughout an interminable consumption of goods and information. The racket invades family life to envelop
its members in an aura of data-generating terror but offering neither understanding nor wisdom. The babel inevitably affects how one thinks and feels. It clogs the mind of Jack Gladney, a professor of Hitler studies, and creates a metaphysical excess that allows him to intellectualize Hitler and separate genocide from Gladney's writing. Through this uncontrollable moral jumble, DeLillo issues a call starkly to pare down the conceptual falsities and frustrating appetites caused by the marketing of desire. DeLillo's recent *Underworld* (1997) is an imposing work about a massive accumulation of waste that demands a drastic ascesis in the culture to check and cleanse the noxious profusion. The task falls to Nick Shay, a waste manager. He must makes sense and order of the detritus of civilization. Like the desert elders in their rocky crags, Shay must sift through the world's mess to recover the inherent mystery of creation.

O'Connor's treatment of the desert is even more comprehensive. Personal, biblical, and aesthetic forces undergird O'Connor's evolving sympathy with the spiritual experiment of the ancient Christian East. With these biographical and typological sources as continual points of reference, this study undertakes a reexamination of O'Connor's fiction. Its aim will be to trace the development of her treatment of the desert as she brings self-denial to bear on the urgencies of twentieth-century American life. That reapplication of desert spirituality is perhaps the allure and magnificence of O'Connor's fiction. Many writers have explored the "under-consciousness" that D. H. Lawrence in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923) calls "devilish" (83); a number of artists also have portrayed the solitude and empty spaces of America; and some even have described the desert we carry within; but only Flannery O'Connor has shown how encountering the devil in this inner emptiness opens life up to fullness in God. Through O'Connor's record of her protagonists' anguish and triumphs, the whole of an ancient wisdom, simultaneously theoretical and practical, has been transmitted, giving modern fiction new life.

My account begins with a consideration of O'Connor's life and sensibility that disposed her to ascetic spirituality. The second chapter shows how the ancient ascetic search unfolds in *Wise Blood* (1952), O'Connor's first novel. In this ambitious chapter, my aim is dual: to lay out the complexities of ascetic life by examining the solitary's struggle within the contexts of both late antiquity and contemporary experience. My understanding of *Wise Blood* as the Ur-text of O'Connor's asceticism accounts for the length of this section. The study then distinguishes among the various desert calls summoning her characters to solitude in *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955), her first collection of short fiction. As O'Connor takes her protagonists into deeper zones of renun-
ciation in *The Violent Bear It Away* (1960) and *Everything That Rises Must Converge* (1965), new ascetic topics come to the fore; accordingly, I take up with finer precision these special aspects of desert practice. These include *acedia* (bitterness leading to a hatred of life), *catanyxis* (stabbing the heart), *penthos* (tears and mourning), compunction, and friendship. Appropriately, the book sums up matters with a profile of the *geron* or the old man, a lifetime preoccupation for O'Connor, who is for her—as for the desert mothers and fathers—the person of maturity recognized for his spiritual gifts. The discussion proceeds chronologically.

In tracing the ascetic patterns of O'Connor's art, *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist* departs from the usual scholarly text in several ways. In the first place, while the discussion takes into account the few studies that mention O'Connor's solitary life and medically enforced asceticism, the book does not go into the nearly forty books and two thousand articles on O'Connor simply for the sake of inclusion or quibbling. My practice is to focus sharply on the spiritual issue at hand. Accordingly, I emphasize the ancient materials because these are the most relevant to the argument and least known to O'Connor scholars. In the interest of reaching a general audience, I have avoided trendy academic jargon to make my writing as clear and readable as I can for all readers. Anything that makes it difficult for those not in the "guild" to read this book defeats my purpose. I seek, finally, to go beyond the objective marshaling of facts and erudition. Along with the analyses, I wish to express a personal reflection that brings to life the striking inner worlds of O'Connor's writing.

I hope to do justice, in this way, to the range of O'Connor's artistic craftsmanship in the course of gauging her spiritual exploration of our age. The study draws heavily on *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* and *The Lives of the Desert Fathers*, the principal records of their unusual experiment. Through the *Sayings*, the *Lives*, and allied texts, O'Connor discovered how to guide her fictional solitaries to start life afresh and, despite their unbelief, come close to God. Readers of this study will also find John Cassian's *Conferences*, the fifth-century pioneering commentary on desert spirituality, helpful in putting alien desert asceticism into a modern psychological perspective. The affinity linking O'Connor's sensibility with Cassian's exploration of early Christian monasticism runs deep and wide—just how extensively will be clear in the chapters on O'Connor's short stories. Should we need further support of their kinship, we will find it confirmed from a reciprocal direction by Columba Stewart, a monk writing about a monk in *Cassian the Monk* (1998). Stewart finds O'Connor sufficiently insightful about ascetic life to use her remarks on renuncia-
tion, grace, and purity [HB 126] as an authoritative modern way into these ancient eremitic concepts as taught by Cassian [Stewart 42].

Within O'Connor's attention to the qualities of inner life, we can sense a prescient concern for the crisis unfolding in the outer world. As we enter the twenty-first century, the need for guidance to deal with the evil that makes us dominate and destroy others in unprecedented numbers has become increasingly compelling. In his 1995 study of cultural responses to evil, The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil, Andrew Delbanco argues that a "gulf has opened up in our culture between the visibility of evil and the intellectual resources available for coping with it" [3]. The point is well emphasized. Wallace Stevens, from whom Delbanco's title comes, and others have observed the moral deficit. During this most brutal of centuries, horrors such as death camps, nuclear explosions, napalm, smart bombs, and ethnic cleansing have far outstripped our responses to these monstrous events. The wide gap between the evil act and our awareness or understanding of it has made room for the archtrickster to pull off one of his finest stunts yet: Satan has vanished. He has slipped out of his many traditional guises into thin air, permeating the moral atmosphere we breathe. Barbarity and sin have been so institutionalized that they are no longer identified as evil but rather have been assimilated into the expected hum and buzz—the white noise—of everyday life to become policies of various governments, sources of financial profit, and amusements on the evening news. Looking back on the American past, Delbanco sees by contrast in Puritan culture a time when the "devil was an incandescent presence in most people's lives, a symbol and explanation for both the cruelties one received and those perpetrated upon others" [4]. After tracing the nineteenth-century negotiations [liberal individualism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis] leading to our present "crisis of incompetence" [3], Delbanco calls for a recovery of our sense of sin and personal responsibility that will bridge the chasm between evil and our comprehension of it and thereby smoke the devil out of hiding.

Delbanco's project, reset within a Christian perspective, would have been instantly endorsed by Flannery O'Connor. Early on, she detected the way the time-spirit was moving. In fact, immediately following World War II, when the United States was flush with righteous triumphalism and global prestige, she sounded the alarm about the modern world, which she found experiencing "a dark night of the soul" [HB 100]. The dark night she saw not only eclipsed decency but disabled the soul's discernment of evil. From her first published story in 1946 to her posthumous volume of 1965—from the war's aftermath to the advent of the civil
rights movement and feminism—she sought to revive our sense of evil to bring us to God. She struggled persistently to give the devil his due against “an audience which does not believe in evil, or better, in the reality of a personal devil, in principalities and in powers” [HB 357]. In failing to recognize evil, modern readers, O'Connor shrewdly understood, also lose sight of good. “My audience are the people who think God is dead” [HB 92]. It is no exaggeration to claim that O'Connor waged a one-woman war against the age’s moral blindness. She knew that to have a sense of sin, one must first see it for what it is.

Writing to John Hawkes on 20 November 1959 and apprehensive about the misreading of her forthcoming novel The Violent Bear It Away [1960], in which the devil repeatedly tries to finesse his own disappearance, O'Connor states: “I want to be certain that the Devil gets identified as the Devil and not simply taken for this or that psychological tendency” [HB 360]. None of the disavowals of evil fogging the mind of our time blurs her perception. “My Devil has a name, a history and a definite plan,” she declares in her famous correction of Hawkes’s mistaking his Manichean devil for her biblical adversary. O’Connor proceeds: “His name is Lucifer, he’s a fallen angel, his sin is pride, and his aim is the destruction of the Divine plan” [HB 456]. Satan’s ascendancy is tangible to O’Connor. “If you live today you breathe in nihilism,” she states to “A,” who has been identified as Betty Hester. In her correspondence, occasional prose, and fiction, O’Connor aims to name evil, put a face on it, and teach her audience “the necessity of fighting it” [HB 97]. In the course of helping us wage war against the devil and make moral sense of our lives, O’Connor has given us in her writing a spiritual record of modern America at mid-century [which is something of a fault line in our history] that abuts on the disintegrating segments of our millennial consciousness.

Simply put, learning to discern and combating Satan constitute the essential dramas of O’Connor’s fiction. The way in which she has her characters fight the good fight, however, is not through critical inquiry, political debate, or social activism. Laudable and effective as these strategies might be for others, they are not in the least her affair. With typical self-humor, at once disarming and edgy, that reveals important truths about herself, O’Connor writes to her friend Maryat Lee: “Lord, I’m glad I’m a hermit novelist” [HB 227]. The term “hermit novelist” places O’Connor firmly in the tradition of fourth-century spirituality, and it is by living out the radical simplicity of eremitical solitude and ascesis [training and discipline] that her characters grapple with their demons. Ascetic withdrawal, past or present, is more than a means of expressing social distance. Ascesis equips O’Connor’s solitaries with self-criticism,
prayer, and humility. Though these austere weapons hardly seem adequate against death camps and racial hatred, this ordnance from the soul's armory embodies nothing less transformative than the Gospels' redemptive power. Moreover, far from being solely a spiritual effort, this battle fully engages the physical body. The protagonist's whole physical structure and substance are swept into this momentous inner struggle; the body, the fragile token of humanness, in this engagement comes to bear the awesome help of God in the war against Satan. Strangely, divine aid in this fight against the demons comes violently and with unexpected pain for the spiritual combatant. God's interfering presence shocks and penetrates the very blood and sinews of the solitary warrior.

From their huts and caves, the ancient desert-dwellers saw the late Roman Empire rife with evil and developed ways of facing it out. O'Connor had an equally clear perspective on and concern for the world in which she lived. Although she lived and wrote in the Georgia backwoods, O'Connor grasped the horrors of our time, and she boldly took them on. War (both hot and cold), concentration camps, racism, terrorism, mass murder, infanticide, suicide, economic oppression, exile, sexism, and sheer human loneliness make up the historical and existential context of her art. And there are, lest we ignore and incite them anew, the masses roaming the planet raging at their insignificance. O'Connor was even more daring (as of course her spiritual ally in the Kentucky cloister, Thomas Merton, was during the same period) in reviving the strange, still voice of the fourth-century desert mothers and fathers as a response to the rampant evil of our century. O'Connor may have been miles away from her huts and caves, but she strode across our era as if it were her front porch. Here, amid the sheltering pines of her Georgia hermitage, all the sinful power relations of the larger world play themselves out. Her sanctuary remains in her fiction the moral measure of her vast spiritual adventures. Once accepted as the condition of her life and felt through in her art, the desert life of solitude and warfare provides the ideal against which O'Connor would henceforth judge the heartrending dissensions of the society around her.

When Flannery O'Connor called herself "a hermit novelist" in the letter of 28 June 1957 to Maryat Lee, who was pursuing a writing career in New York at the time, O'Connor was referring specifically to being cut off from that larger world where her intellectual and artistic affinities might have taken her. But the word hermit over time acquired greater suitability to describe O'Connor than the initial context could indicate.
In the condition of her life, as with the nature of her art, O’Connor’s faith made all the difference, for belief in God opened up the spiritual possibilities of her seclusion in backwoods Georgia. From all the biographical facts that we have, thanks to Sally Fitzgerald, we can see that O’Connor also became a hermit in the religious sense of the word. Her inner needs were answered in Scripture and patristic writings, which O’Connor read not merely for interest but for use. She practiced what contemplatives call lectio divina, which is the classical way of reading and listening to sacred texts as if in conversation with Christ. Her library and reviews also tell us that she grew in isolation as a woman of faith through prayerful reading. Nourished by a desire to draw close to God and to have a prayer life, her inner development inevitably affected her artistic practice; and, as a consequence of this influence, O’Connor finally became a hermit novelist in her integrating with her stories and novels the anguish and wisdom of the desert-dwellers’ inner search for God. The result is a fiction that probes the warring life of the soul. At a time such as now when power more than inner truth preoccupies us, and when, as a crisis technician in DeLillo’s White Noise tells the hero, “you are the sum total of your data” [141], O’Connor gives readers accounts, modern and yet ancient, of the uncommon renunciative adventure through the arid wastes of solitude and across the human body.

The life of solitude, in sum, was essential for Flannery O’Connor’s vocation as an artist. She thrived in isolation from the larger literary world. From December 1950 until her death in August 1964, the productive period of her career, O’Connor lived on her mother’s dairy farm of 1,500 acres, affectionately dubbed the Andalusian Cow Plantation [HB 576], four miles outside Milledgeville, the antebellum capital of Georgia. Contact with the larger world was limited. “I live on a farm and don’t see many people,” O’Connor explained to “A” on 2 August 1955 [HB 91]. Every two or three years, she might have gotten to see a movie [HB 248]. For contemporary readers who channel-surf disasters and whose attachment to cyberspace provides instant and multiple intimacies through electronic mail, web sites, and facsimiles, life off Highway 441 North must seem incomprehensibly disconnected. A telephone line was not run out to the farm until 27 July 1956 [HB 167]; a portable television arrived as a gift only in 1961 [HB 435]. There were trips to Atlanta, ninety miles away, to colleges and universities for talks, and to Europe for a grudging pilgrimage in the spring of 1958; but the patch of dairy farm encompassing 500 acres of fields and 1,000 acres of woods in the far corner of Baldwin County, lying “four miles out with the birds and the bees and the prospect” [HB 278], was O’Connor’s place of work.
Fruitful as it was for her in the long run, rural Georgia was not O'Connor's place of choice. Her intention was to live elsewhere, as far away from the South as New York and its environs, for a while at least to test the literary waters. As Joyce had to leave Ireland to know it, O'Connor felt the need to distance herself from "the dear old dirty Southland" (HB 266) to write about it. Sickness, however, changed her plans. A life-threatening flare-up of lupus in late 1950 yanked O'Connor back to a "very muddy and manurey" outpost (HB 226) on Route 441 heading north toward Eatonton (HB 205), home of Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus. When faced with a future in the backwoods, she feared for her creative life. Even though she needed her mother's supportive care because on arrival she "was nearly dead with lupus" (HB 448), as she admitted eleven years later in 1961, O'Connor had to be "roped and tied and resigned the way it is necessary to be resigned to death" (HB 224) and "borne home on a stretcher, all out helpless" (HB 495) before she would submit to being hauled back to a farmstead that could be reached only by "bus or buzzard" (HB 77). O'Connor naturally wanted to be with other young writers and talented people with whom she could grow as a literary artist. In Georgia, she would be a displaced person. And so she was. O'Connor was forced to be a solitary against her will.

With her great achievement before us, we can now see that O'Connor's being une solitaire malgré elle remanded to "the Georgia wilderness" (HB 77) released her genius in ways that she could not have anticipated. The fourteen years in the desert/wilderness were a personal and artistic exodus for her. In time, O'Connor came to see reclusion not with resistance and anger but with gratitude and humility. From a hospital bed on 19 June 1964, six weeks before her death on 3 August 1964, O'Connor wrote to a friend who was emotionally close to her in illness: "but home is home" (HB 585). Home means "peaceful days & nights" (HB 583), affording the deepest comfort and rest. The exile that seemed at first dreadful turned out to be a godsend. Compelled by writing, exhausted from illness, O'Connor found somewhere to be quiet, genuine, and refreshed. To be sure, O'Connor's change of heart came at great emotional cost, but she paid the price and did acknowledge that her refuge of necessity became her sacred space of growth. Far from being "the end of any creation, any writing, any WORK from me," O'Connor reassures Mary-at Lee, who was facing the same prospect of return to the southern hinterlands, that reclusion "was only the beginning" (HB 224)—the slow, painful beginning of an all-too-brief yet amazing creative endeavor.

The desert mothers and fathers understand the interior bearings of the new starting point to which the homecomer, by choice or fate, is
brought. "Humility," says Abba Alonius, a desert father, "is the land where God wants us to go and offer sacrifice" (Merton, Wisdom 83 [53]). O'Connor describes to "A" the medical condition that brought her to this place of oblation. "I have never been anywhere but sick," she writes on 28 June 1956 (HB 163). Sue Walker has followed O'Connor into "the country of sickness" and has cogently explained how lupus yields very particular figures in O'Connor's art and shapes her idea of grace (33–58). Again, set within the desert tradition, O'Connor's geography of lupus reconfigures Abba Alonius's land of humility within the ancient world of reclusive solitude: "In a sense sickness is a place, more instructive than a long trip to Europe, and it's always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow" (HB 163). Between the desire for physical and artistic freedom and the constraints of chronic illness yawns the unbridgeable abyss of O'Connor's personal passion and cross. There, family and friends cannot follow. There, from that essential distance, O'Connor creates a fiction that plunges the reader into an incredible closeness. This closeness itself begets another distance as it calls from her solitude to that of another.

As with the desert elders, the trial of solitude was for O'Connor the trial of will. Her bitter resistance turned into acceptance of confinement. Surrender by surrender, O'Connor became, despite herself, a monk in the original meaning of solitary (Greek feminine monachê). Though she read from A Short Breviary, O'Connor did not undergo monastic training; her spiritual regimen was her rich scholarship, raising peafowl, and daily writing. This private discipline fostered self-scrutiny, which for the Christian involves cultivating within oneself the disposition that led Jesus to his death. Fourteen years in the land of humility worked their obediential lesson on O'Connor. She learned how to fight self-sorrow and defeat with a prayerfulness that converted affliction into acceptance, achievement into gratitude. "I work from such a basis of poverty that everything I do is a miracle to me" she writes to "A" (HB 127). Life, in the land to which God called O'Connor, forged in her the spiritually crucial habit of humility, the virtue that Abba Anthony understands to be mighty enough to get one through "the snares that the enemy spreads out over the world" (Sayings, Anthony the Great 7 [2]).

Humility has for O'Connor another power that it had for the desert teachers. As with the solitaries, place for O'Connor becomes a form of knowledge. Recalling in a letter to "A" (16 December 1955) the now-celebrated evening with Mary McCarthy, O'Connor said to the group: "St. Catherine of Siena had called self-knowledge a 'cell,' and that she, an unlettered woman, had remained in it literally for three years and had