

Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain*: Descent and Vision in the Southern Memoir

by Michael Odom

Southern memoirs often follow a conventional pattern: a writer grows up in the South, experiences a crisis of identity with the cultural values, and eventually overcomes this tension by migrating North, through education, or both. A pattern typified in Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner* and Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, southern memoirs often depict a writer who flees to find herself, only later to emerge as a more objective critic of the South. Such memoirs by southern whites often come to terms with a moment of crisis centered on race. While these moments of racial awareness may center on pivotal childhood experiences—Lumpkin witnessing her father abusing a black servant and Smith being told that white and colored children cannot play together—they are recounted by an adult who has fled the South and metaphorically returned through the writing of the memoir. In the second paragraph of *Killers of the Dream*, Smith explains:

This haunted childhood belongs to every southerner of my age. We ran away from it but we came back like a hurt animal to its wound, or a murderer to the scene of his sin. The human heart dares not stay away too long from that which hurt it most. There is a return journey to anguish that few of us are released from making. (25–26)

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While these childhood moments set such writers on a path for understanding themselves and southern culture, the literal and figurative separation from the South enables these writers to write about race in such a forthright manner. Depicting the South as antagonistic to their development, such memoirs make it imperative that the writer transcend cultural constraints in order to achieve a sense of vision.

Dennis Covington's *Salvation on Sand Mountain: Snake Handling and Redemption in Southern Appalachia* documents a spiritual journey into the heart of a marginalized religious culture, offering an inversion of this prototypical approach to southern memoirs. From the opening pages of *Salvation on Sand Mountain*, Covington centers on not race but religion as a key to understanding the South's identity, and he takes great pains to present a fair and sympathetic perspective of snake handlers and rural southerners alike. Covington's initial interest in snake handling culture begins when he is a journalist for *The New York Times* covering the Scottsboro, Alabama, trial of Reverend Glen Summerford, who is eventually convicted to serve ninety-nine years in prison for attempting to murder his wife with the same rattlesnakes used in the services of his church. Rather than viewing the trial as an amusing spectacle of southern freaks, Covington becomes fascinated with the earnest faith of the snake handlers. Covington's interest is not driven by mere curiosity; he becomes charmed with the snake handling culture in what amounts to gonzo journalism at its finest. Attracted to "the passion and abandon of their worship," Covington engages in a compassionate investigation into a culture that has been derided as grotesque (67). In what follows, I reveal how Covington employs a rhetorical approach of self-writing that is typical of southern identity memoirs while differing from their epistemology of cultural isolation. While many of these memoirs differ from *Salvation on Sand Mountain* in their writing about racial injustice and violence, I will show how Covington's focus on spiritual issues enables him to grapple with the same cumbersome history and social issues that have long plagued the South. By inverting the conventional pattern of transcendence, Covington generates a vision of southern identity in memoir that comes at a price: his descent into soul and south will involve a de-centering of self, a disorientation that results from engaging in a snake-handling culture that also holds the key to his identity.

In "Open Secrets: Memory, Imagination, and the Refashioning of Southern Identity," Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues that Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner* perfectly exemplifies the memoir's dual function of self-expression and social commentary. Hall argues that Lumpkin's "turn to home" after her Northern education functions as a redemptive mission of reconfiguring the South as both critic

and citizen. Allying herself with the causes of racial and economic justice, Lumpkin later returned home to the South, but as sociologist, historian, and autobiographer. On this return she would redeem the South through confrontation and demystification. To illustrate Lumpkin's status as a courageous "return migrant," Hall quotes Carol Stack's *Call To Home*: "You definitely can go home again. You can go back. But you don't start from where you left. To fit in, you have to create another place in that place you left behind" (110). In "Framing Southern Rhetoric," Scott Romine suggests that Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream* performs the same dual function in a complex rhetorical strategy that situates Smith as a southerner who simultaneously critiques the culture as an outsider. In this respect, Smith re-authenticates herself as both subject and object, affording her "impeccable credentials as a Southerner but [one] who has eluded Southern constraints on verbal expression" (96). The textual explorations of "writing the self" serve as a resolution for both Lumpkin and Smith's southern identity within the region (96). Within both memoirs, the writer overcomes the tension that she feels in relation to the dominant culture by presenting herself as an outsider capable of transcending cultural limitations to "didactically take measure" of the South (97). By isolating the self from culture, the writer engages in a rhetorical interplay that equates her former self—a child raised in the South—with the prevailing cultural sentiment, only to interrogate those values with the newer, more critical self (97). Transcending the burdensome culture of the South seems to be a necessary strategy for these representative memoirs to achieve a clear vision of both the South and the self.¹

While Covington employs some of the same rhetorical strategies, his inverted approach envisions southern culture differently: rather than bringing the present self back to revise the South's influence, Covington returns to find value there. This inverted narrative pattern was set by James Agee and Walker Evans in their 1941 masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Eschewing what W.E.B. Du Bois called the "car-window" sociological approach to documenting poverty, Agee submerges himself in southern culture by living with and among poor sharecroppers in rural Alabama. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* functions as a memoir about Agee's own metamorphosis—what John Hussey refers to as a "solitary quest for spiritual renewal" (680). Agee's personal quest centers upon finding a sense of home, "a hallowed ground which nourishes and heals his fractured spirit" (681). The author's regeneration functions prescriptively for the reader to also share in the transformative experience and see southern culture with better vision. Agee's unflinching exposure of rural poverty seeks to imbue the reader with a social conscience that feels the weight of responsibility for the neglected conditions of the

sharecroppers.² After agonizing over his role as a “spy” to the impoverished whites he documents, Agee finally arrives at an epiphany—what I would call a sense of vision—after immersing himself into the lives of the sharecroppers. Agee’s solidarity with the people he documents produces not only a more thoughtful knowledge of southern culture, but of Agee himself. The personal cost of discomfort living among poor southerners, in Agee’s estimation, is a cheap price to pay for such precious knowledge.

Again inverting views that perceive the South as a devalued origin, Covington perceives his present, journalistic vocation as hindering his ability to fairly depict the southern snake handlers, and similar to Agee, he understands that he has much to learn from his origin: “The handlers showed me something, and I was ready to be shown” (67). Just as Agee and Evans began their project as a journalistic article of sharecroppers only to abandon it for something far more comprehensive, Covington conceives of a work that will present the snake handlers more fairly and deeply.³ Covington even places himself as an outsider from the start by recalling his upbringing in the industrial city of Birmingham, Alabama. Reading the great writers of southern fiction reminded him “of how little [he] knew about real life” in the South (xvi). Covington states that he grew up in a “quiet, sober neighborhood, where the families of grocers and plumbers and office workers tried to secure a hold on middle-class respectability” (8). Part of this middle-class respectability is embodied in the Methodist church that Covington attended when he was a boy. During annual revivals, Covington got his first taste of the more daring religious temperament of sweaty itinerate preachers from southern Appalachia. Those early days, he explains, “were filled with desperate innocence and with a spiritual light,” providing the boy with a perception of danger and spirituality fused, and this during an impressionable time that he could not shake in his adult life. Covington continues,

And if my experience in that church did nothing else for me, it accustomed me to strange outpourings of the Spirit and gave me a tender regard for con artists and voices in the wilderness, no matter how odd or suspicious their message might be. I believe it also put me in touch with a rough-cut and reckless side of myself that I otherwise might never have recognized, locked way back somewhere in cell memory, a cultural legacy I would have otherwise known nothing about. (10)

With a troubling subject matter that intermingles southern, grotesque, and religious, it should come as no surprise that Covington feels a sense of kinship with Flannery O’Connor. The epigraph for *Salvation on Sand Mountain* comes

appropriately from O'Connor's essay, "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," to insinuate that artistic vision occurs through a process of descent into the depths of writer and region:

This descent into himself will, at the same time, be a descent into his region. It will be a descent through the darkness of the familiar into a world where, like the blind man cured in the gospels, he sees men as if they were trees, but walking. (O'Connor 50)

O'Connor originally wrote her essay as a response to complaints that her fiction was full of freaks and not inspirational for the weary reader. She felt the need to explain the orientation of not only her fiction, but also other southern writers who were similarly criticized for being preoccupied with the grotesque.⁴ O'Connor contends that a writer who embraces mystery will write from his own sense of clarity, and writing from inner vision involves distorting reality by de-centering the reader. She writes, "Instead of reflecting a balance from the world around him, the novelist now has to achieve [a world] from a felt balance inside himself" (49). Covington later echoes O'Connor by claiming that the artist writes not with the literal eye, but "an eye on the inside of his head" (175). It is only from the inner eye of the writer's imagination that he "beholds the connectedness of things, of past, present, and future" (175).

Yet this search for vision within the self must not be performed in isolation. As O'Connor warns, this creative act of self-descent can pose a problem: how far can the writer distort without destroying? O'Connor's solution suggests that descent into the self involves a simultaneous descent into the region. In "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South," O'Connor commends the benefits of living intimately among "backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists" in the southern region, arguing that the writer should generate a greater interest and sympathy with these grotesque religious characters "because descending within himself to find his region, he discovers that it is with these aspects of southern life that he has a feeling of kinship strong enough to spur him to write" (207).

Taking his cue from O'Connor, Covington understands that his audience approaches the subject of snake-handling with disdain; therefore, like O'Connor, it is important for Covington to take the handlers seriously and remain sympathetic to their earnest faith and strong sense of spiritual purpose. Covington likewise comes to understand the "grotesque" South as a region marginalized and "under assault" by the mainstream. As a result, the South's peculiarities and extremes are often an inverted vision of what Covington describes as "a violent reaction to a modern world who is hostile to them and spiritually dead" (xvii–xviii). In the

following passage, Covington contends that snake handling—or any other grotesque practices deemed unsuitable by modern culture—embodies an adverse reaction to the dominant secular culture it offends:

Snake handling, for instance, didn't originate back in the hills somewhere. It started when people came down from the hills to discover they were surrounded by a hostile and spiritually dead culture. All along their border with the modern world—in places like Newport, Tennessee, and Sand Mountain, Alabama—they recoiled. They threw up defenses. When their own resources failed, they called down the Holy Ghost. They put their hands through fire. They drank poison. They took up serpents. They still do. The South hasn't disappeared. If anything it's become more Southern in a last-ditch effort to save itself. (xvii–xviii)

With a tone of hostility in his prologue, Covington complains about the “scorn and ridicule the nation has heaped upon poor southern whites, the only ethnic group in America not permitted to have a history” (xviii). In addition, Covington expresses discomfort with the “skewed priorities” of the media who treat the Summerford trial as an exhibition for the amusement of their more educated readership (39).⁵

Covington's sensitivity enables him to see beyond the awkward ducktails and outdated fashions characterized as “white trash.”⁶ In his view, the snake handlers are “refugees from a culture on the ropes,” who filled the spiritual vacuum left by the failed promises of modernity (24). Covington appears to resist references to the Civil War so as to disarm generalizations or sociological templates traditionally employed for understanding southern identity. This is illustrated in his discussion of Scottsboro, Alabama, the location of the Summerford trial. Covington teases out three versions of southern identity from the Scottsboro case: first is the historical identity of Scottsboro, the Old South linked to slave plantations. The South's historical identity, he suggests, is painful because of the trial in which nine black youths were wrongly convicted of raping two white women. Covington is interested in the idea that Scottsboro residents referred to the ordeal as one of the “accidents of history . . . that have marked the town unjustly for life” (22). The second identity he adduces from the case is the contemporary identity of the New South that the town's leaders want to accentuate through its business and commerce. The third is the religious identity that reveals the frustrations of poor whites who have not achieved the economic prosperity promised them when they came down from the mountains. Covington explains that the New South “progress since World War II has been double-edged: it has meant higher wages, better

health, and less isolation from the rest of the world, but it has also meant the loss of a traditional way of life" (23).

The families of snake handling churches originally came down from the Appalachian Mountains after World War Two, explains Covington, "trying to eke out a living and a sense of dignity," and Scottsboro, in particular, represents "an island of possibility in the midst of a southern culture in crisis" (23). Covington provides the same analysis of the snake handlers in Jolo, West Virginia, where hopeful people relocated from the mountains only to participate in an industrialized society that eroded purposeful labor, fractured families, and obliterated any sense of the sacred (88). The alluring promise of economic prosperity forced them into contact with the dominant secular culture, resulting in an inevitable compromise of traditional values and religious identity. When the promise of prosperity failed to deliver, the subsequent reaction of poor southern whites swung them back into a fanatical spirituality as a violent means of reclamation. The primary drama of their lives, therefore, consists of never "backing up on the Lord," an expression also characterized as "backsliding" in one's religious faith (25).⁷ The resulting isolation from broader secular culture marks the snake handlers, in their own minds, as being in the world but not of the world.

Rather than casting an evolved self altering the perception of the South as "other," as with the traditional memoir, Covington's investigations of these "others" ground his personal quest of reclamation and renewal. In the first chapter, "Following Signs," Covington seems keenly aware that he is on the brink of a new experience through which a single choice will have life-altering consequences.⁸ In his first service at "The Church of Jesus with Signs Following," the snake handling church of the recently convicted Reverend Summerford, Covington feels a sense of kinship with the congregation. Brother Carl Porter, the interim pastor, preaches a sermon and handles a copperhead. Covington's use of imagery proves symbolic for both the church and his own personal journey: "The snake appeared to be in the process of reinventing itself, forging a new self out of the old" (19). Covington is reinventing himself by participating in the snake handling church, and Brother Carl proves crucial in facilitating it. Early on in the narrative, Covington indicates that Summerford's church is fractured and lost without a pastor to lead it; similarly, Covington's own sense of selfhood is fractured as he straddles the fence between his Methodist church in Birmingham and the snake handling culture of the Southern Appalachians: "But something was missing. I had reached that point in the middle of looking for something when you have forgotten what it is you have lost" (55). Covington's spiritual experience among the snake handlers de-centers him in a way that makes him uncomfortable worshiping back home in

his Birmingham church. Fittingly, Brother Carl becomes a spiritual mentor and father figure to Covington in his spiritual journey of descent.

Shortly after, in the chapter "Under the Brush Arbor," Covington recounts his first authentic taste of Pentecostalism in the Holiness Tradition. Covington discusses the characteristics of Pentecostalism and details a theological framework filled with tension. For example, there is a strong suspicion of academic learning and intelligence coupled with esoteric emphases given privately by the Holy Spirit (e.g., a twelve-hour message is given on the word "polluted"); or consider the hostility of Pentecostals toward tradition and liturgy ("snake handlers don't stand on ceremony") combined with their own litmus test for authentic worship in the Spirit that must be accompanied by speaking in tongues. To further illustrate the conflicts in this theology, Covington analyzes the etymological tension in the phrase "brush-arbor," the outdoor worship site atop Sand Mountain. While arbor connotes what Covington describes as "civilized restraint," brush suggests wildness (67). This etymological irony captures Covington's own experience in a worship service where he unconsciously plays the tambourine, "accompanying" a traveling evangelist's wife in the Spirit as she speaks in tongues. Covington considers his experience of harmonic abandonment as an authentic religious experience that functions as a rite of passage into the snake handling community: "Through the tambourine, I was occurring with her in the Spirit, and it was not of my own will [. . .] It was after that brush-arbor meeting on Sand Mountain that they started to call me Brother Dennis" (80).

Covington's metamorphosis continues as he travels to Jolo. Covington plunges into a "chaos of intersecting planes" as he drives through the East Tennessee Appalachians, a place wild and formidable "to become lost in," where the awaited destination involves strangers handling rattlesnakes and drinking poison (83, 89). Covington's worshipful experience at Jolo fills him with a sense of destiny and reinforces the memoir's message concerning identity—that a loss of self precedes vision:

In both sexual and religious ecstasy, the first thing that goes is self. The entrance into ecstasy is surrender. Handlers talk about receiving the Holy Ghost. But when the Holy Ghost is fully come upon someone like Gracie McAllister, the expression on her face reads exactly the opposite—as though someone, or something, were being violently taken away from her. The paradox of Christianity, one of many of which Jesus speaks, is that only in losing ourselves do we find ourselves, and perhaps that's why photos of the handlers so often seem to be portraits of loss. (99)

Covington compares this loss of self to a near death experience he had while freelance reporting in a combat zone in El Salvador. The adrenaline rush and invulnerability that accompanies combat provides Covington with a sense of illumination. Anticipating his readers' skepticism concerning this religious experience, Covington makes it a point to clarify that while he is typically a person who can feign spontaneity, this was authentic: "But what happened that Friday night in Jolo wasn't calculated. I had experienced something genuine, and I was awed by what I had seen. I might as well have been watching people defy the law of gravity or breathe underwater. It was that startling, that inexplicable" (103). After this religious experience, Covington emerges with a homesick feeling for a place he had never been (108).

Covington submerges himself into the Holiness roots of his own Methodist church and family history to achieve a more authentic sense of self: "My journey with the snake handlers had become not so much a linear progression through time as a falling through levels of platitude toward some hard understanding of who I was" (132). This submerging pattern into the lower recesses is signified by the image of the snake, its uncoiling skin embodying Covington's superficial southern identity being pared away. In chapter six, appropriately titled "Roots," Covington begins to mix his own personal search through his family's genealogy with the historical tracing of the Holiness-Pentecostal church. The history of American Methodism holds a special significance, for it mirrors Covington's own religious heritage. Covington points out that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, planted the beginnings of the Holiness movement with its emphasis on a baptism in the Holy Spirit separate from conversion, a doctrine further developed by Pentecostalism that required corresponding signs (snake handling eventually being one of them in some sects). The Methodist church would eventually split from the Holiness movement along economic lines, the middle class remaining within the more "respectable" traditional denomination and the lower class following the Holiness thread to live more radically separated lives in devotion to their religion.

Cecil Robeck notes that Pentecostalism emerged out of the Wesleyan-Holiness movement and originated at the beginning of the twentieth century in the ministry of Charles Fox Parham and the Azusa Street revivals in Los Angeles. The Pentecostal movement received its name from the biblical account of Acts 2:1-4, where Christians first received the Holy Spirit, marked by the ability to speak in tongues and other outward signs. The dynamic essence of Pentecostalism lies in stressing what God is doing now. Pentecostals actively rediscover the human psyche, fully integrating the conscious and the subconscious through a "radical decentering of the self, including tears, groanings, apparent babel," and other "phenomena such

as visions, dreams, speaking in tongues, miracles, and revelation" ("Pentecostalism," 531).⁹ Covington discovers that his great-great-grandfather was a Methodist evangelist who frequented Sand Mountain and might have planted seeds from the Holiness tradition that later emerged into the snake handling culture of Scottsboro. In addition, Covington discovers another set of Covingtons who were snake handlers in Tennessee who may or may not be related to him.

Covington embraces a southern past for his present identity through participation in unsettling practices that prove revelatory in understanding the South's troubling legacy; here at the climax of Covington's memoir, he again inverts the conventional pattern of the southern memoirist who transcends the southern past through critical distance. This becomes clear when, near the end of his memoir, he reveals his own history and fascination with snakes—a puzzling rhetorical shift clearly meant to come as a surprise. By revealing his long-time obsession with snakes after documenting his religious experiences with snake handling culture, Covington uncoils his own identity in another manifestation of memoir writing. Not only has the snake served as an object of affection for Covington since boyhood, it serves as a sacramental object that represents the mysterious and unpredictable past that we all must handle if we desire to understand ourselves: "all of us were handling one kind of snake or another" (151). In this sense, snakes function metaphorically for the South's dangerous legacy of racial strife, an "uncertain past" that was "problematic and embarrassing because it contained poverty, ignorance, racism, and defeat." As Covington remarks, "No one wanted to claim it. No one wanted to take it out of the box" (151). The snakes of the South's cultural legacy embody a past that might seem on first glance preferable to ignore. To be conquered, however, "snakes" must be taken up. Covington takes up his own legacy by handling a poisonous snake in a frenzied worship service in Sand Mountain, Alabama. During the service, Covington describes himself engaged in a semi-conscious, out-of-body experience, as he suddenly realizes he is shouting and holding a rattlesnake. This victory of self-loss proves to be personally empowering for Covington since he takes up not only the literal snake, but the suppressed snakes of his past.

After this pivotal experience, Covington informs the reader of a story he had written at the age of nineteen entitled, "Salvation on Sand Mountain" (the title of the memoir and the climactic chapter where he takes up the snake). Much like his own personal history with snakes, which he withholds from the reader, the Holiness church on Sand Mountain in this story turns out to be the very church where he takes up the snake. Covington claims he never even visited Sand Mountain when he wrote the story (at the age of nineteen), and that his own experience

at the Old Rock House Holiness Church in real life charts a mystery. Crucial to this section of the memoir is Covington's description precisely of mystery and vision for the artist to tell stories. It is here that Covington echoes the pivotal epigraph he includes by O'Connor: by claiming that the artist writes not with the literal eye, but "an eye on the inside of his head" (175). It is only from the inner eye of the writer's imagination that he "beholds the connectedness of things, of past, present, and future" (175). By becoming his own subject for a memoir along with the snake handlers, Covington reflects upon the mystery of motivation that he suggests we all possess—that is, to seek knowledge about our world and, more importantly, about ourselves.

Covington's personal metamorphosis peaks when he comes to the realization soon after his first handling that "madness and religion were a hair's breadth away" (177). Here, the journalist in Covington resurfaces; he sends mixed signals of believing in the validity of these spiritual experiences while injecting the skeptical intellectual's sarcasm. In documenting what he calls the "war stories" of snake handlers, Covington seems intent on overwhelming the reader with gratuitous stories of violence and death. Throughout these stories, Covington portrays the snake handlers who suffer casualties as heroic, as similar to soldiers dying for a transcendent cause. The war is a spiritual one, as Covington makes clear, and the "tragedy is not the death of a particular snake handler, but the failure of the world to accept the gospel that the handler risked his life to confirm" (184). Yet much of the warfare he depicts is rooted in class and economics as much as it is religion. The cultural clash between rural and urban cultures in the South is crystallized when snake handlers defend their way of life by clarifying that they would rather die by snakes than in the mines or from drugs. Covington sees the absurdity of this false dilemma set up by the fundamentalist imperative (God or the Devil) and knows that he is in way over his head. This realization proves a turning point for Covington, allowing him to realize that his desire to be sympathetic to the snake handlers has clouded his judgment.¹⁰

A noticeable shift in tone occurs in the course of the memoir: the narrative shifts, in particular, from curiosity, fascination, and admiration to shock and disillusionment. A character introduced late in the memoir, Elvis Presley Saylor, embodies Covington's own dissatisfaction and movement away from the handlers. Saylor uses scripture and logic to debunk the irrationality of the handlers, and he becomes a centering point in Covington's own melding of religious experience and exploration. Covington reflects: "I thought about Elvis, and the way he had been ostracized. What I didn't know was that what had happened to him was about to happen to me. At the time, I just turned the radio off when I got to

the interstate that would take me to Akron, the same one that would eventually lead me home" (212). As this passage makes clear, Pentecostals operate according to a zero-sum logic: a person is either hot or cold—in the Lord or in the Devil. Those who are moderate, like Saylor, are thus suspicious to partisans and fanatics. Covington turns the tables and inverts the snake handlers' logic through the story of Saylor. The snake handlers have now become the establishment, akin to the legalistic Pharisees found in the New Testament, while Saylor has become the outcast because he is a compassionate and intellectual moderate.

In the final chapter, Covington provides a sober reflection that reveals a more objective distance from his experiences. In particular, he informs the reader that his "career as a snake-handling preacher was a brief one" (213). Covington closes the memoir with a call to home by his father. As he returns home to Birmingham with his family, he recalls how his father differed from other parents yelling for their kids to come home for dinner: his father came to the place Covington was before he called him home. It seems crucial that Covington's vision is achieved by coming to the place that connected him to his past. While it is not required that Covington remain in the depths, coming to this place of vision required descent and participation to achieve such clarity.

Rather than depicting southern culture as an oppressive antagonist, then, Covington's memoir engages in a sympathetic yet sorrowful look at the South's troubled past, and casts a courageous glance into its future. Covington submerges himself in a marginalized section of southern culture where most would never dare to venture—a dual-descent into the southern region and the artist's soul. It is only through the intimacy with the handlers that Covington can see his own faults, and it is thus through incorporating rather than leaving the South that he achieves clarity and vision. Covington finds his people and himself in the rural South, and his memoir thus emerges as a rhetorical merging of subject and object. By presenting the religious South as a fruitful region that can yield an authentic sense of selfhood, Covington advances the genre of southern memoirs and expands our appreciation of a complex region.

NOTES

1. Other southern identity memoirs that follow the conventional pattern include Richard Wright's *Black Boy* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Dust Tracks on a Road*. I would also classify W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* as following this same pattern of the southern memoir, even though it does not technically qualify as such; for example, Cash establishes his southern credentials as a North Carolinian early on and continues to style himself as one having risen above the conditions that narrow the southern mind.

2. Agee captures this knowledge of immanence deftly in the following passage: “[A]ll that surrounded me, that silently strove in through my senses and stretched me full, was familiar and dear to me as nothing else on earth, and as if well known in a deep past and long years lost; so that I could wish that all my chance life was in truth the betrayal, the curable delusion, that it seemed, and that this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right. For half my blood is just this; and half my right of speech; and by bland chance alone is my life so softened and sophisticated in the years of my defenselessness, and I am robbed of a royalty I can not only never claim, but never properly much desire or regret” (365).

3. One such episode occurs after a service where he apologizes to Brother Carl Porter for taking notes during the service. Brother Carl encourages him to write a book about snake-handling because it will be tantamount to spreading the gospel and edifying the body of Christ. Covington’s internal reaction proves crucial: “I nodded. But I wonder if Brother Carl knew then about the inevitable treachery that stood between journalist and subject. I wonder if he was ready for the dance that would have to take place between him and me” (20).

4. O’Connor laments a public that demands “a literature which is balanced and which will somehow heal the ravages of our times”; this self-help inclination amounts to the reader expecting the writer to be “the handmaid of his age” by encouraging social order and well-being (46). According to O’Connor, much of the public craves fiction where “novels are considered entirely concerned with the social or economic or psychological forces that they will by necessity exhibit,” making the current demand for “realism” a litmus test for “orthodoxy” (38). This emphasis, according to O’Connor, serves to limit rather than broaden the novel’s scope (38–39).

5. The Summerfords are dehumanized even by their own lawyers who characterize their clients as dysfunctional and unreasonable; Darlene’s own attorney emphasizes her seventh grade education, resulting in a “poverty of imagination” that would be incapable of the defense attorney’s counter claim that she was, in fact, trying to murder her own husband (40).

6. Covington elaborates in the following description: “What might have been nothing more than ordinary decorum in a different social context appeared in this one to be wariness and suspicion. Their glances toward the journalists were thick-lidded and vaguely menacing. . . . I saw now that the unnerving cast to the men’s faces was probably just inflexibility, an unwillingness to give themselves up to public emotion. It had to do not so much with their religion, I reasoned, as with their poverty” (36).

7. Covington states that backsliding was the crux of Reverend Summerford’s trial; both prosecuting and defending attorneys refer to the other party as backslidden when recalling the events in question between Glenn and Darlene Summerford. As Covington states, “the only sure thing was that backsliding was serious business in this part of the state” (38).

8. Covington uses the titles of each chapter to convey a double meaning. One sense refers to the subject matter of his memoir found in the snake-handling culture, while another sense refers to himself as the narrator-subject enduring his own struggle for identity.

9. Robeck provides an insightful discussion on Pentecostalism's legacy. Pentecostalism's positive legacy, according to Robeck, lies in its democratization of Christianity—both in church government and in stressing equality of members regardless of race, gender, age, or any other forms of classification; thus, from its beginnings at Azusa Street from 1906–1909, led by the African American, William Joseph Seymour, Pentecostals are the most racially diverse denomination in America (531). Robeck further praises Pentecostalism's democratization as embodied in the personal testimony, a “people's theology,” which is just as important as the pastor's sermon.

10. Here I would like to add another connection to Flannery O'Connor, as her sympathetic vision of evangelical characters seemed to cloud her judgment toward non-believers. In O'Connor's fiction, the most common antagonists are secular intellectuals.

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