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## “Things Only a Miracle Can Set to Rights”: Reading Flannery O’Connor, Violence, and Ambiguity in William Gay’s “The Paperhanger”<sup>1</sup>

Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.

—Flannery O’Connor, “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” (818)

I wouldn’t want to be caught saying that violence is good. . . . But violence, for all manner of reasons, finds some of us. I would maintain it doesn’t make us bad, it only makes us human.

—Harry Crews, “The Violence That Finds Us” (190)

IN WILLIAM GAY’S SHORT AND LONG FICTION, VIOLENCE IS AUTOPSIED TO reveal less its origin than its consequences to those who come in contact with it. A culture of violence pervades this fiction as a mundane fact of life, like drought, or rain, or any naturally occurring event. This same sobering truth also applies to the fiction of Tom Franklin and Cormac McCarthy, fellow Southern writers whom Gay highly esteemed. All three are the literary offspring of Flannery O’Connor and William Faulkner, and the family gene that courses through their fiction is the essay O’Connor called “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction.” Bound by the characteristically violent coupling or intersection of contrary elements—like a banal family vacation that suddenly turns into an “ACCIDENT” and the consequential quasi-philosophical inquiry in which life and death hang in the balance—Gay takes the grotesque into a “lost country”<sup>2</sup> wherein ambiguity and violence are among the few constants in an inconstant world. Whatever grace or redemption or

<sup>1</sup>For William Gay (in memoriam), who, in the company of his good friend Sonny Brewer at the wheel, made a road trip all the way to Waterville, Maine, in late September, 2011. And for Adrian Blevins, who kept saying “You’ve got to write it!”

<sup>2</sup>“The Lost Country” is the title of a final, unpublished novel by William Gay, who died on February 23, 2012.

salvation is possible lies in human agency and the lessons learned, as Faulkner said, from “the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself” (723).

William Giraldi, in his interview-based essay on Gay’s fiction, makes this cogent observation about “The Paperhanger”:

The story breathes, enigmatically, as if just born. It offers almost no information about these characters: not where they come from, not their fevered dreams, not what they yearn for at first light. . . . In “The Paperhanger” we know only how the characters react in the midst of an unexpected mystery, and with that alone Gay enables us to know them for life. (332)

There are no facile answers in Gay’s fiction generally, and specifically none in this enigmatic story about what Flannery O’Connor calls the grotesque.<sup>3</sup> And it could be said with equal force of Gay’s fiction what O’Connor famously said of her own, paraphrasing W. B. Yeats: “I believe that there are many rough beasts now slouching toward Bethlehem to be born and that I have reported the progress of a few of them” (*Habit* 90). Much of the blueprint for this “reporting” lay in what began as a public lecture O’Connor gave in 1960 and was later printed as “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction.”<sup>4</sup> This essay has become one of the signal mid-twentieth century statements about a species of American realism deeply and distinctly rooted in what O’Connor called a “Christ-haunted” South. As a result of being “flooded with sorry fiction based on unearned liberties, or on the notion that fiction must represent the typical,” the reading public has less understanding and regard for “the deeper kinds of realism” that are “alive,” “eccentric” (814-15), and increasingly the locus of “good Southern writers” (818). In a line of

<sup>3</sup>It is inherently risky to read “Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction” as bullet points, the danger lying in reductionism that compromises the alternately cautionary, ironic, and humorous range of O’Connor’s voice. Hers is the reluctant voice of the fiction writer treading self-consciously on the domain of the literary critic-scholar, a precarious straddling of two very different worlds O’Connor tries to balance by claiming “experience” as her warrant. “My own approach to literary problems,” O’Connor cautiously and comically announces at the essay’s outset, “is very like the one Dr. Johnson’s blind housekeeper used when she poured tea—she put her finger inside the cup” (813).

<sup>4</sup>The essay was first printed in the posthumously published collection of O’Connor’s nonfiction writing, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1964), edited by her long-time friends, Sally and Robert Fitzgerald.

descent from William Faulkner—"the Dixie Limited" (818) whom O'Connor implies established the standards of excellence for Southern grotesque fiction—and O'Connor herself, the novels and stories Gay produced from 1995 until his death in 2012 extend this genre, even as the grotesque has been vigorously challenged by Mab Segrest,<sup>5</sup> on the one hand, and reluctantly defended as "a decadent southern form" in need of a "paradigm shift"(xiii) by Patricia Yaeger, on the other hand.

Although in general agreement with what she describes as Segrest's assessment of the Southern grotesque as a "physically dangerous" enterprise that disenfranchises women and serves "reprehensible political ends" (Yaeger 25), in *Dirt and Desire*, Yaeger reclaims the grotesque for a post-O'Connor and Faulkner generation of white and black Southern women writers. To accomplish this near-death resuscitation, Yaeger proposes a radical expansion of the Southern grotesque, rather than its disappearance altogether. Although Yaeger's primary focus is "racial epistemologies in American women's literature" (xi), several of her approximately nineteen points have direct relevance to the grotesque as deployed by O'Connor and Gay: first, its manner of "positioning texts at the edges of southern disorder . . . [which] is worth studying because it has become an American habit of disorder as well" (13); second, "that southern literature is obsessed with dirt—who owns it, who cleans it; *with bodies that go into the ground*" (13, emphasis added); and third, that this literature is profoundly concerned with "arrested systems of knowledge or 'the unthought known'" (12). Combined with rather than opposed to O'Connor's "aspects of the grotesque," Yaeger's gender- and race-specific enlargements make apparent Gay's appropriations, his repetition and revision of the Southern grotesque.

Specifying the "directed intention[s]" that make fiction "grotesque," O'Connor stresses that the writer has

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<sup>5</sup>Segrest passionately contends that the grotesque in Southern literature and culture is animated by guilt-producing patriarchal privilege and sexism that is especially injurious to female subjectivity and creativity:

The grotesque, then, serves deliberate political ends. It fastens the creative imagination on images of deformity and despair. Backed by patriarchal myth, it persuades us that this is reality. . . . The grotesque limits the creative imagination by causing divisions within the self so that the individual is cut off from her deepest parts, from those oracles and visions that could tell of a different reality. (29)

made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe everyday, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters. . . . have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected. It is this kind of realism that I want to consider. ("Some Aspects" 815)

O'Connor also links the grotesque as practiced by Southern writers to an atypical kind of realism much less concerned with "the ordinary aspects of daily-life" (813) and indifferent to the "tired reader" whose need is "to be lifted up" by stories stressing "redemptive act[s]" (820). Redemption is not an unreasonable expectation in fiction, but it comes at the cost, O'Connor insists, of restoring the plain fact of evil to a faithless world from which it has been "diluted" and "forgotten" (820). O'Connor's realism contains a vision of evil and goodness that Gay has inherited—a vision firmly fixed in an aesthetics of violence and nature crucial to Southern literary production well beyond O'Connor's mid-century milieu. In place of the "trite, exhausted, imaginary" psychological "explanations" (Gibaldi 332) of monstrosity and evil in a postmodern world, there are the artful and strategically narrative ways questions are framed to pull the reader into Gay's work, making it difficult *not* to inquire about "a world almost rotten"<sup>6</sup> and possibly beyond redemption.

Late in "The Paperhanger," its titular character makes the chilling announcement that "The line between grave robbing and archaeology has always looked a little blurry to me" (88). This statement expresses an ambiguity that is performed in strategic ways throughout the story and constructs paradoxical binaries that, like the "blurry" distinction between "grave robbing and archaeology," complicate the desperate efforts of characters and the reader to fix reality. The species of ambiguity inferable in "The Paperhanger" resists either/or constructions of meaning and forsakes simple resolutions in preference for the complexity of both/and, or counterpoised interpretive possibilities. For example, several months after the mysterious disappearance of her child, the mother encounters the paperhanger who, unbeknownst to her, has murdered the child and hidden her body. She offers to pay the

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<sup>6</sup>The title of Gibaldi's essay echos "The world is almost rotten," a line from and an early working title of O'Connor's story "The Life you Save May Be Your Own" (Asals 64-65).

paperhanger for helping to find her four-year-old daughter, Zeineb, whom she fears may be dead. His response is disturbingly principled, honest, and true: "I wouldn't charge anybody anything to search for a child's body. . . . But she's not in these woods. Nothing could have stayed hidden, the way these woods were searched" (85). Not knowing that this man whose help she accepts has first stuffed the child's body in the bottom of his tool kit and, later, transferred it to a freezer in his house, the mother has no way to discriminate between truth and falsehood, no way to tease out the subtleties of seeing and knowing that bind together the horrific play of ambiguity in the paperhanger's grotesque worldview.

"The Paperhanger" was first published in *Harper's* magazine in 2000, the same year Gay also published his second novel, *Provinces of Night*, and approximately a year after the publication of his first novel, *The Long Home*. The story has subsequently appeared in several anthologies,<sup>7</sup> but its signal place is in Gay's first collection of short fiction, *I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down* (2002). Fourth among thirteen stories, seven previously published, "The Paperhanger" occupies a pivotal position in several respects. First, "The Paperhanger," like the previous three stories in the collection,<sup>8</sup> involves a death that propels the plot and poignantly positions the reader between life and death. The earliest instance of this occurs in the final paragraph of the title story about the severely injured main character, Abner Meechan:

He pressed his face to the glass [of the ambulance] as a child might and watched the irrevocable slide of scenery, tree and field and sleeping farmhouse, studying each object as it hove into view and went slipstreaming off the dark glass as if it might have something to tell him, might give him some intimation as to his destination. (30)

Second, "The Paperhanger" marks a modal, musical shift in *I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down* from death to three sequential stories that rhetorically employ the blues and pop culture to thematize the ways loss and regret, memory and violence—like a refrain or discordant note—

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<sup>7</sup> "The Paperhanger" has been reprinted in *Best New American Voices*; *Prize Stories 2001: The O. Henry Awards*; *New Stories from the South, 2001: The Year's Best*; *The Best American Mystery Stories 2001*; and *Prize Stories 2001*.

<sup>8</sup>As they appear in the collection: "I Hate to See That Evening Sun Go Down," "A Death in the Woods," and "Bonedaddy, Quincy Nell, and the Fifteen Thousand BTU Electric Chair."

incessantly repeat themselves, refusing to be reconciled. For example, in “The Man Who Knew Dylan,” the fifth story, Billy Crosswaithe has come to the end of a seven-year effort to walk “the straight and narrow, a sober member of the business community, an apprentice mover and shaker” (101). Now, with his wife dying and hooked up to a machine that does her breathing for her, he’s made a series of disastrous decisions that he cannot take back. And with the “Grim Reaper” staring him in the face, Crosswaithe sees “that all his youthful optimism was long gone, that his time had come and gone to waste. That things were not all right and would probably not be all right again” (103, 104). Spotting a dead deer in the bed of a pick-up truck, Crosswaithe muses, “I’ve had days when I could have raised that deer from the dead like Lazarus” (104). Later in the story, the unexpected opportunity to sit in with a bar band and play on a borrowed National steel guitar, a guitar he “had to feel in his own hands” (111), raises him from the dead. Desperate to lay down the burden of his dying wife and escape the “straight and narrow” of social conformity, Crosswaithe, on stage and playing Son House’s “Death Letter Blues,” is “seized” by “the old magic” and “a tide of power that rolled over him and made him omnipotent, invulnerable to kryptonite and bulletproof” (112).<sup>9</sup>

Although “The Paperhanger” is generally not framed within the music motif that thematically and structurally binds together the next three stories in sequence—“The Man Who Knew Dylan,” “Those Deep Elm Brown’s Ferry Blues,” and “Crossroads Blues”—it does signify on an

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<sup>9</sup>The reference to Son House evokes the legendary Mississippi Delta blues tradition and the first generation of artists to be recorded in the late 1920s and 1930s, including Charley Patton and Tommy Johnson, who, according to his own report, during a full moon and at the stroke of midnight met a large black man at a deserted Delta crossroads and sold his soul to him in exchange for supernatural blues guitar playing skills. It is, however, Robert Johnson’s autobiographical composition “Crossroad Blues” that captures Billy Crosswaithe’s frantic and possibly futile effort to start life over by running back to a time when he felt invincible. In “Crossroad Blues,” the speaker laments, “Didn’t nobody seem to know me, everybody passed me by” and “I haven’t got no loving sweet woman that loves and feels my care.” Both the pitiable tone and situation of these lyrics parallel Billy Crosswaithe’s ingratiating lies to his ex-girlfriend Robin over the phone, which are summed up in the last stanza of “Crossroad Blues”:

You can run, you can run, tell my friend, poor Willie Brown,  
 You can run, tell my friend, poor Willie Brown,  
 Lord, that I’m standing at the crossroad, babe, I believe I’m  
*sinking down.* (Barlow 49, emphasis added)

idea essential to blues culture expressed in the phrase "looking up at down," popularized by a William "Big Bill" Broonzy composition. An example of what blues scholar William Barlow calls Broonzy's "subversive blues humor in the face of adversity," the song's final verse laments,

Everything I get ahold of, baby, it goes away like snow in June  
If I get a chance again, baby, I'm going up to the moon,  
Yeah now, baby, gal, I believe I'll change towns,  
Yeah, poor me's down so low, baby, Big Bill is lookin' up at down. (304)

Significantly, in "The Paperhanger," looking up at down—and the familiar vernacular variation, "been down so long, down looks up to me"—is discernible in the relationship between horizontality and verticality, which join ambiguity and violence as this story's signal narrative devices. The play on spatiality, on looking up at down, subtly develops the class struggle—a triangulation of desire involving the grieving mother, the paperhanger, and the missing child that propels the action throughout the story.

The first paragraph analogizes "the events preceding the disappearance"—so "freighted with menace"—to a "footman or a fool preceding a king into a room" (72), thereby subtly linking class stratification, footman/fool and king, with the spatial play on high and low, the privileged, or entitled "self" and the invisible "other." Ironically, in this story, where nothing is as it seems and where nature errs in monstrous ways, the plot depends upon restoring a social order perceived by the paperhanger as turned upside down by the invasion of foreigners—the putative outsiders like "the doctor" and "the doctor's wife," who have no particular identities beyond their occupations and place of origin, Pakistan, and who have become the dominant insiders. "The Paperhanger" also raises these issues about the "blurry" lines between self and other, truth and lies, power and privilege by deploying a narrative conceit central to a blues-saturated text, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*: "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead" (6). In other words, through indirection the story intimates answers in the beginning to questions that proliferate at the end about the paperhanger's motivation and aggrieved point of view "looking up at down." Gay establishes the analogy between horizontality and verticality and class conflict early in the story, as these scenes illustrate:



She had been quarreling with the paperhanger. Her four-year-old daughter, Zeineb, was standing directly behind the paperhanger where he knelt smoothing air bubbles out with a wide plastic trowel. . . . The paperhanger, still on his knees, turned. He smiled up at her. He had pale blue eyes. (72, 73)

In this scene, the height differential between an adult male and a four-year-old child is inverted, placing the paperhanger in a subordinate, passive relation to both mother and child. The differential intensifies moments later when the doctor's wife calls the paperhanger "trash" and "scum" for leaving lumps in the wet wallpaper and allegedly overcharging for his work:

*Hands on knees, he was pushing erect*, the girl's dark fingers trailing out of his hair. Don't call me trash, he said, as if it were perfectly all right to call him scum, but he was already talking to [the mother's] back. She had whirled on her heels and went twisting her hips through an arched doorway into the cathedraled living room. The paperhanger looked *down* at the child. Her face glowed with a strange constrained glee, as if she and the paperhanger shared some secret the rest of the world hadn't caught on to yet. (73-74, emphasis added)

The most critical convergence of spatiality and class strife occurs in the final three pages of "The Paperhanger" after the doctor's wife has deteriorated, seemingly beyond hope or the possibility of miracles, to a place where "There is no longer one thing that matters" (90). "Dissolution, ruin, loss" is the paperhanger's final judgment as he looks at the doctor's wife (91). The terms just as aptly describe the desecrated graveyard to which paperhanger has taken her, marking the descent into degradation that, from his point of view, razes the social differences between them that are assignable to privilege and power:

*How surely everything had fallen from her*: beauty, wealth, social position, arrogance. Humanity itself, for by now she seemed scarcely human, beleaguered so by the fates that she suffered his hands on her breasts as just one more cross to bear, one more indignity to endure.

How far you've come, the paperhanger said in wonder. *I believe you're about down to my level now, don't you?*(90, emphasis added)

This descent that "levels" difference through grief and humiliation may reach its nadir and, paradoxically, mark the advent of grace when the paperhanger places the frozen dead child next to the sleeping mother, positioning her arm around the corpse. The ambiguity here points to, as O'Connor stressed, a character's "fictional qualities [that] lean away from

typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" that define the grotesque ("Some Aspects" 815). Throughout "The Paperhanger," ambiguity and spatiality coalesce to develop a "sense of an ending" that complicates the possibility of morality or cosmic order in a world that both Gay and O'Connor, for shared and different reasons, find "almost rotten" but possibly not beyond grace.

In Gay's story, a grieving, guilt-ridden mother whose missing child has been "sent . . . into the abstract" prays "with intensity for a miracle" because, as the paperhanger darkly says as she is sleeping, "there are things only a miracle can set to rights" (82, 91). Does creating the grotesque tableau of Madonna and child on the last page produce a "miracle," or set things right? And can this gothic moment become the "action of grace" offered to so many of O'Connor's characters (and readers) at the end of stories such as "A Good Man Is Hard To Find," which, like "The Paperhanger," is on one level a polemical inquiry into miracles, mysteries, morality and what Plato called the "reality of things unseen"?<sup>10</sup> In one sense, the interstitial gaps or ambiguity of knowing send the reader into the abstract where, as Yaeger writes, "arrested systems of knowledge or '*the unthought known*'" unsettles normative constructions of behavior and relationships (12, emphasis added).

This epistemological paradox animates the tragicomic dialogue between The Misfit and the grandmother in O'Connor's grotesque story and shapes the late encounter between the paperhanger and the doctor's wife. The binary concerns with life and death, memory and loss, faith and doubt, guilt and redemption involve all four characters in an inquiry into the "reality" of miracles and a desperate effort to save themselves from a world where human existence has become a simulacrum for living in a void without meaning—for being sent "into the abstract" where each of these characters in some sense resides. In the terrifying syllogistic logic of *The Misfit*, there's "no real pleasure in life" (153) because if miracles are not possible, then God, heaven and hell, virtue

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<sup>10</sup>Gay has acknowledged in various places the influence of O'Connor's fiction on his own writing and speaks at length in William Gibaldi's interview-essay about what Gibaldi describes as marveling "over [O'Connor's] packed sentences, her perfect endings. . . . and from her brilliance he learned how short fiction is shaped, how a character can come alive in just a few lines, and, more importantly, how to tell a story that matters" (333). In another important interview, Gay also cites the shaping influence of Thomas Wolfe and especially Cormac McCarthy and William Faulkner on his writerly development (Adkisson).

and goodness do not exist. Absent experiential evidence of what Jacques Derrida, in “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” calls a “transcendental signified”—an illusion-based construction of an absolute moral “center” (280)—there is no logical reason to act humanely, which leaves one unsatisfyingly free, again as The Misfit argues, to “enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness” (152).

The Misfit, however, *wants* to believe in the miracle of resurrection because he wants his life to have a moral meaning that is expressed in the idea of “balance” between good and evil, which has been “thown off” by an insufficiency of experiential, objective proof of what Jesus reportedly has done. In reply to the grandmother’s exhaustively mumbling, “Maybe He didn’t raise the dead,” The Misfit replies, “I wasn’t there so I can’t say He didn’t. . . . It ain’t right I wasn’t there because if I had of been there I would of known. . . . if I had of been there I would of known and I wouldn’t be like I am now” (152). As the paperhanger confesses to the murdered child’s mother, “You break things you just can’t fix. Before you mean to, before you know you’ve done it.” And when you have, “there are things only a miracle can set to rights” (91). Like The Misfit, the paperhanger also seems to believe in the miracle of resurrection, which he may perform in three possible ways: first, he disinters Zeineb’s frozen body, which he has preserved as if he were anticipating a moment of miraculous recovery; second, by placing the child’s body in her mother’s arms, the paperhanger opens up the possibility of moving the mother past the paralysis of mourning toward closure where life can begin again; and third, by these seemingly penitent acts, he begins to atone—“to set things to rights”—for a heinous crime committed in a spontaneous moment of rage that potentially could lead to his own transformation and redemption. Such a performance may be necessary, as Harry Crews provocatively suggests in the 1984 interview that includes the second epigraph to this essay, not because violence is good, but “for all manner [and mystery] of reasons,” including the O’Connor-like possibility of grace, because violence “finds some of us” and “only makes us human” (190).

However, words such as “possibility” and “potential” are necessary qualifications of the paperhanger’s murky motivations and call attention to the linguistic ways ambiguity and paradox inform Gay’s story. These elements also signify by repetition and revision on O’Connor’s Catholic

worldview. Because Gay's narrative strategies proliferate questions about the consequences of the paperhanger's actions whose answers exist in the "abstract," beyond the final page, interpretive certainty is fraught and—like the line between grave robbing and archaeology—"a little blurry." Consequently, the storyline both challenges and affirms O'Connor's moral vision. Frequently, in her own fiction, O'Connor's Catholicism, what Robert H. Brinkmeyer calls her "sacramental vision," is an antidote for the Yeatsian slouching toward apocalypse. Paraphrasing Lewis P. Simpson, Brinkmeyer asserts that the "loss of the sacramental vision utterly transformed the modern mind" and becomes a "model of truth, replacing the authority of revelation and tradition" with an inward turn toward absolute subjectivity (2, 3).

In the late twentieth century postmodernist culture of violence represented by Gay's stories and novels, O'Connor's kind of "Christian Realism" (*Habit* 92), which depends upon the inevitability of suffering and the Incarnation, is virtually non-existent, and seems largely ineffectual against the "progress of rough beasts" like the paperhanger in "a world almost rotten." In a letter written to a close friend, Betty Hester, shortly after the publication of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find and Other Stories* (1955), O'Connor opines,

One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for. (*Habit* 92)

Like her "audience" of readers, The Misfit does not believe in the Incarnation, but in his cynicism devoutly wishes to. And for the paperhanger, miracles seem, at best, vestigial evidence that the world is "almost" but not completely morally "rotten" because grace, however dim, abides. Or, at worst, the paperhanger's actions imply that miracles are simply a sadistic opportunity to play god, which, concurring with The Misfit, is the only "real pleasure in life." The difference between the paperhanger's worldview and The Misfit's would be a difference without a distinction were it not for the hope that resides in the image of The Misfit as a homicidal version of Diogenes the Cynic wandering in search of a good man and other experiential proofs of grace in the phenomenal world.

Realizing grace in O'Connor's story depends upon an instrument or vehicle (the grandmother), an action or "gesture" (like the grandmother's touching The Misfit and proclaiming "You're one of my own children!" [152]), and a skeptic or disbeliever. Given this powerful triangulation, grace is possible no matter how violent and terrible the human experience. O'Connor seems to express something very close to this formula in an essay titled "On Her Own Work":

I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. (112-13)

Gay's paperhanger, however, is arguably beyond even the possibility of grace and, as the story predicts in its conclusion, he will roll through the "open country," in the doctor's wife's stolen Mercedes, "tracking into wide-open territories he could infect like a malignant spore" (92). Ironically, the doctor who unwittingly provides the vehicle for the paperhanger's malignant spread also provides a different kind of vehicle through the reference to Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming," that resonates subtly throughout the story and in O'Connor's allusion to "rough beasts" cited above. Given the doctor's losses, he "had particular cause to reconsider the poetry of William Butler Yeats. For how surely things fell apart, how surely the center did not hold" (82). The doctor's sense of a "deepening progression to misfortune" beyond which "things can only get worse" (82-83) links him philosophically—"turning, and turning in the widening gyre" of chaos—to the paperhanger's postmodern worldview. The doctor's loss of family, of wife and child, and seemingly of his will to succeed shatters the illusion of a moral center that can resist the indefatigable onslaught of agents of chaos—"come round at last"—like the paperhanger.

Finally, William Gay, William Butler Yeats, and Flannery O'Connor all seem to share an entropic worldview that asserts, sometimes in profoundly different ways, the possibility of an orderly universe, then smashes it, and then problematically resurrects it through ambiguity. In a world "almost rotten" and full of rough beasts acting as the Antichrist, the illusion of clarity about truth or falsehood, family, mercy, innocence, miracles, and redemption collapses. Interpretive possibility reproduces itself, like a disease unchecked, and its spread, through whatever vehicle of language or machine, becomes the only certainty.

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