

## Strange Capabilities: Grace, Space, and Modernism in the Short Fiction of Flannery O'Connor

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In a 1955 letter to "A," Flannery O'Connor said she "read the Russians, not Tolstoy so much but Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov, and Gogol" (*Habit* 98-99). Her mentioning Tolstoy by way of minimizing his importance suggests that her correspondent might have expected Tolstoy to rank higher among O'Connor's literary influences. This expectation would not be unreasonable. Tolstoy, together with Dostoevsky, was regarded in the first half of the twentieth century as the modern Christian writer par excellence—an undeniable force as close to O'Connor's time as she is to our own. A searcher who challenged his own class privilege by writing parables for common people and who preached a practical Christianity unfettered by institutions and theology, Tolstoy had strong appeal among Western intellectuals. His Christian socialism inspired William Dean Howells's sweeping and humane New York novel, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), and the embrace of Tolstoy in the English-speaking world coincided with the rise of modernism. A list of twentieth-century writers who register Tolstoy's influence would include such diverse names as Chesterton, Woolf, Shaw, Cather, Hemingway, McCullers, Barthelme, and, in a more practical sphere, Jane Addams, who visited Tolstoy in 1896, and Dorothy Day,

who has been grouped with O'Connor as a member of a mid-century American "School of the Holy Ghost."<sup>1</sup>

O'Connor's relative neglect of Tolstoy is intriguing. Of course, the intrigue might be dispelled by recalling that she crammed her way onto the literary scene, not undertaking any systematic literary study until she was sending out her own stories, and that the other Russians she mentions exerted their own attractions. (In response to a letter from Betty Boyd Love in 1952 she wrote, "I like Tolstoy too but Gogol is necessary along with the light" [*Habit* 44].) Then too, O'Connor's steadfast Catholicism hardly squares with Tolstoy's drift away from Russian Orthodoxy to personal Christianity; and his popular tales of the 1880s and '90s and his more formal "Master and Man" seem

<sup>1</sup>In *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910), Addams, looking back to the mid-1890s, writes: "I was but one of thousands of our contemporaries who were turning toward this Russian, not as to a seer—his message is much too confused and contradictory for that—but as to a man who has had the ability to lift to the level of his conscience, to translate his theories into action" (188). Howells said Tolstoy gave him "new criterions, new principles" (qtd. in Schlesinger xii). G. K. Chesterton wrote *Simplicity and Tolstoy* (1912); George Bernard Shaw published several essays on Tolstoy; Virginia and Leonard Woolf assisted in the translation of Russian books on Tolstoy in the 1920s: see Andreyev's Select Bibliography. Cather drew upon Tolstoy's *A Confession* (1884) in *The Professor's House* (1925) (Murphy, "Modernist Conversion"). Ernest Hemingway, who reportedly said, "Nobody's going to get me in any ring with Mr. Tolstoy unless I'm crazy or I keep getting better," learned from the Russian's treatments of war and death and attained his cult status (qtd. in Lynn 549). Carson McCuller's *Clock without Hands* (1961) adapts the concerns of *The Death of Ivan Ilych* (1886) to a Southern setting (included in this issue). Donald Barthelme collected his short story "At the Tolstoy Museum" in *City Life* (1970). Paul Elie's recent *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (2003) traces a "School of the Holy Ghost" including Walker Percy and Thomas Merton as well as O'Connor and Dorothy Day (Elie xii). Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement, said the meaning of her life was "to live up to the moral vision of the Church, and some of my favorite writers," including Dickens, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy (qtd. in Elie 452–53). Elie also describes Tolstoy's and Dostoevsky's early twentieth-century reputations (15–16).

relatively simple and didactic compared to her darkly comic and obscurely violent stories of the 1950s and early '60s. However, a close reading of these Tolstoy stories next to O'Connor's revives the intrigue. In their short fiction Tolstoy and O'Connor actually faced a remarkably similar complex of problems involving audience, supernatural grace, character integrity, and space—and they moved toward remarkably similar solutions. A consideration of these works together suggests, on the one hand, that in Tolstoy O'Connor might have overlooked a vital literary ancestor. On the other hand, one begins to sense that in brushing gently past him she was instinctively trying, in her own religious modernism, to do something different.

Both O'Connor and the late-phase Tolstoy wanted to communicate religious truth, and their strategies for doing so depended on their imagined audiences. Driven by his practical Christianity and didactic aesthetics, Tolstoy began in the 1880s to compose his "Stories for the People." These popular morality tales respectfully accommodate the uneducated, orthodox reader through their simple and ingenuous narrative style, folk characters and language, Biblical cadences and epigrams, and proverbial titles: "Evil Allures, But God Endures," "Where Love Is, God Is," "A Spark Neglected Burns the House" (Jahn "Tolstoy" 119). In many cases, folk sources caused Tolstoy to suspend his usual objection to the supernatural and to admit angels and demons into otherwise realistic settings (Jahn "A Note" 481-82). Tolstoy's more literary "Master and Man" resembles the popular stories in theme and tone but is more complicated in symbolism and psychology, demonstrating the adjustments he made for different levels of audience sophistication (Trahan 471-72).

Like Tolstoy, O'Connor wrote about spiritual reality with a frank awareness of audience, but she considered her mid-twentieth-century American readership difficult to reach. She saw herself addressing at once a range of sophistications and tastes. "If [your stories] are any good at all," she said, "you are eventually going to get a letter from some old lady in California, or some inmate of the Federal Penitentiary or the state insane asylum or the local poorhouse, telling you where you have failed to meet his needs" (*Mystery* 48). Her readers were modern and sec-

ular, rather than traditional and catechized like Tolstoy's, and she regarded them with a longsuffering ambivalence. On one level, she shared their sensibility, describing herself as a Catholic "peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing which Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty" (*Habit* 90). However, as a believer among unbelievers, she felt "the contemporary situation at the ultimate level" (*Habit* 90) and sought to make this vision "apparent by shock"—"to the hard of hearing you shout," she said, "and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures" (*Mystery* 34).

Although she wrote for a secular readership, O'Connor wrote *about* rural Southern folk whose point of reference is as Biblical as that of Tolstoy's peasants. She took Southern fundamentalism seriously because its religious intensity helped to fuel the passage between her belief and the secularism or distraction of her audience and characters: "in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological," she said (*Mystery* 44). Like Tolstoy, O'Connor showed respect for her region by incorporating its language—a fusion of Bible, bumpkin, and billboard—into her narration and titles: "The Lame Shall Enter First," "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," "The Life You Save May Be Your Own."

O'Connor and Tolstoy both sought to expand the vision of their readers by dramatizing spiritual change in their characters. O'Connor understood spiritual transformation as what Aquinas calls the "double act" of "operating" and "cooperating" grace—God's internal movement of the will, and God's assistance of the will to respond externally, through action (Murphy, "Flannery" 417; Aquinas 2:1136–37).<sup>2</sup> In the famous climax of "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," a headstrong and self-satisfied grandmother is left pleading for mercy before a highway killer named the Misfit, who has officiated over the slaughter of her entire family. In her final moments after the Misfit confides to her his spiritual struggles, "the grandmother's head clear[s] for an instant," and she murmurs, "Why you're one of my babies. You're one of my own children!" (152). She reaches out and touches his shoulder, and

<sup>2</sup>In her letters O'Connor mentions her habit of reading Aquinas "about

the Misfit reflexively shoots her three times in the chest. O'Connor herself felt compelled to gloss this mysterious passage by characterizing the grandmother's gesture as "totally right and totally unexpected," both "in character and beyond character." Borrowing a term from medieval criticism, she sees it "on the anagogical level . . . which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (*Mystery* 111-12). Aquinas's system of grace provides a theological structure for O'Connor's reading. When the grandmother's head clears, grace operates upon her will so that, as Aquinas writes, "the will is the thing moved, and God is the mover" (1137). When the grandmother unexpectedly reaches outward to the Misfit, she performs that "exterior act" of the will with which cooperating grace assists her: "God assists us in this act, both by strengthening our will interiorly so as to attain to the act, and by granting outwardly the capability of operating" (Aquinas 1137). The notorious violence of O'Connor's stories actually arises from the demands of this cooperating grace. Echoing Aquinas, O'Connor says that violence "is strangely *capable* of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (*Mystery* 112, italics added). The operation of grace itself, however, remains the invisible force assumed by her fiction: the grandmother's integrity resides in what cannot be seen.

Tolstoy opens a more transparent view of spiritual change in his "Master and Man." Like the grandmother in "A Good Man," Tolstoy's protagonist, the master Brekhunov, is a superficial Christian (although a church warden) who confronts another human soul on a journey gone terribly awry. Brekhunov is stranded in a blizzard en route to purchase land, and after a futile and terrifying attempt to escape alone, he returns to his servant Nikita, whom he has treated until now with no more respect than he accords his horse. But Nikita is freezing to death, the victim of the master's greed and neglect, and suddenly Brekhunov changes: he "stood silent and motionless for half a minute. Then suddenly, with the same resolution with which he used to strike hands when making a good purchase, he took a step back and turning up his sleeves began raking the snow off Nikita" (207). By spreading his body over Nikita to warm him,

Brekhunov saves the man's life but loses his own: "he did not think of his legs or of his hands but only of how to warm the peasant who was lying under him" (208). Brekhunov dies in a "joyous condition," exploding the borders of his self, even as O'Connor's grandmother dies "smiling up at the cloudless sky" after recognizing her kinship with the murderer (152).

Although the freethinking Tolstoy would bridle at its rigors, Thomistic theology does provide a model for comparing how, in both stories, personal anxiety breaks into a spiritual reserve that adjusts the will. This adjustment occurs at a point of suspense when the respective protagonists turn inward, as if witnessing a change there: the grandmother's head "cleared for an instant" (152); the master "stood silent and motionless for half a minute" (207). Next, the will and grace *cooperate* in outward acts that are "both in character and beyond character." When she reaches out to the Misfit as one of her children, the grandmother is still grandmotherly, and when he warms Nikita, the master acts "with the same resolution with which he used to strike hands when making a good purchase" (207), still boastful and ambitious. Grace does not change character; it reorients soul. In Tolstoy's story, this reorientation occupies much more narrative space—five lines in O'Connor's story become some five pages in Tolstoy's. In the course of his death Brekhunov weeps for joy, envisions God coming for him, recognizes that it was God who told him to lie down on Nikita, and ultimately regards his former self at a distance, wondering "why that man called Vasili Brekhunov, had troubled himself with all those things" (210). The tension with which O'Connor's narrative is wound allows no such introspection; the grandmother's response to the motion of grace precipitates her immediate death.

The contrast between these two stories suggests a continuum along which to position O'Connor and Tolstoy's representations of grace experience. At one extreme a character experiences violence or shock, but his or her transformation, only hinted at, is ambiguous or as yet incomplete. Along this continuum the clarity of grace increases through introspection, commentary by the narrator or other characters, and a relaxing of narrative pressure. O'Connor's stories fall all along this contin-

uum, from “Good Country People” (where Hulga’s thoughts after Manly Pointer steals her leg are unexpressed) to “A Good Man” (where the Misfit helpfully comments that the grandmother “would have been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” [153]) to “The Artificial Nigger” (where the narrator clearly explains how a grandfather and grandson’s reconciliation fits into salvation history). Tolstoy’s stories span a comparable range, from “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” where the final state of Pakhom’s soul is unclear, to the religiously eloquent “Master and Man.” Some of Tolstoy’s popular parables suggest the other extreme of the continuum: narratives in which grace experience, viewed without psychological depth, suffuses the entire narrative surface rather than occupying a single climactic scene. For example, in “What Men Live By” spiritual transformation is continual: Simon and Matrena overcome fear and anger, respectively, to accept the vagrant Michael. Meanwhile, Michael, who later reveals himself to be an angel in human form, has been reciprocally changed by the transformations of Simon and Matrena—learning from the love that dwells in man one of the lessons God has grounded him to receive. And so the pattern continues: the spiritual state of the pompous gentleman visited by the Angel of Death and the woman who adopted the orphaned twins are also witnessed by Michael as corrections operating on his own will and understanding, causing him to smile mysteriously.

Whatever the structure of these grace narratives, the moment in which the will shifts from matter to spirit, from self to other, remains mysterious, a narrative lacuna. As O’Connor understood, grace presents problems of credibility for the modern writer: how to make the spiritual visible in a culture that provides scant evidence of its existence. O’Connor writes, “In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom now go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected” (*Mystery* 158). Both Tolstoy (despite his theoretical objection to symbolism) and O’Connor reflect the presence of the sacred in the landscape by pitting it against the materialism of their characters. The landscape becomes a

medium of cooperating grace through which the borders of the soul are adjusted. A conflict between grace and will takes shape in the recurrent geometric forms (circles, spirals, quadrilaterals) and spatial foreshortenings that structure the landscape of these works, creating effects of abstraction, surrealism, and symbolism. Remarkably, both O'Connor and Tolstoy achieve strikingly modern representations of landscape precisely by portraying that landscape as resisting the private consciousness typically associated with modernism.

Identifying herself as a “realist of distances” (*Mystery* 44), O'Connor describes her fictional method in spatial terms—as if the significance of events bore down on the narrative from outside its borders. Space, or rather spatial distortion, is essential to O'Connor's world because she sees every object and action at a spiritual remove that collapses its physical parameters: “In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up” (*Mystery* 44). When O'Connor says that violence is “strangely capable” of bringing her characters to grace, she is effectively suggesting—insofar as cooperating grace “grant[s] outwardly the capability of operating”—that violence has capacity, is *capacious*, a condition of space as much as human action. Repeatedly in her stories, characters move toward grace after suffering the breakdown of borders they guard with sentry-like vigilance. In “A Circle in the Fire,” Mrs. Cope revels in her property as a defensive wall, a “sentinel line of trees” (233), against incursions from the outside world. Her view of the landscape is challenged by the arrival of three boys from the inner city who threaten her with images of fires and parking lots. The eyes of Powell, the ringleader of the boys, “seemed to be making a circle of the place, examining the house and the white water tower behind it and the chicken houses and the pastures that rolled away on either side until they met the first line of woods” (236). Mrs. Cope's encircling fortress gradually breaks down, penetrated by the obtrusive sun, the pestering but visionary boys, and ultimately the flames that consume the woods. In “Greenleaf,” Mrs. May, like Mrs. Cope, feels self-satisfaction in her property bordered by “a black wall of trees with a sharp sawtooth edge that held off the indifferent sky” (511). Looking

out “any window in her house, she saw the reflection of her own character” (511). But Mrs. May’s vision of the landscape is threatened by an intractable bull, which develops, through its pursuit of her, into an image of Christ. Like this bull, Mrs. May’s tenant Mr. Greenleaf appears to issue from a mysterious point of origin that demands a reorientation of self: “He walked on the perimeter of some invisible circle and if you wanted to look him in the face, you had to move and get in front of him” (502–03). Mrs. May forces Mr. Greenleaf to shoot the bull, but before he can do the job, the bull bounds from the woods and gores her in the heart. In her final moments she experiences a surrealistic reapportionment of the landscape: the bull storms into her “as if she had no sense of distance,” and the tree line appears “a dark wound in a world that was nothing but sky” (523).

“A Circle in the Fire” and “Greenleaf” establish a recognizable spatial pattern: circular motion through space, or a conception of space as circular, followed by the total collapse of spatial depth. This pattern seems to appear at various levels everywhere one looks in O’Connor’s fiction: in “A Good Man,” the Misfit traces a circle on the ground, and the grandmother talks in circles until the distance between them collapses; in “The Artificial Nigger,” Mr. Head and Nelson’s circular motion through Atlanta resolves in the convergence of all space in front of the battered statue. The persistence of this sequence in O’Connor’s fiction and its earlier presence in Tolstoy’s as well are cause for attention. It defines them as modernists of belief.

In her essay “Flannery O’Connor’s Poetics of Space,” Christiane Beck situates the geometric contours of O’Connor’s landscapes in terms of modernism’s tendency toward abstraction and two-dimensional planar form. While stopping short of what Joseph Frank calls “spatial form” in modern literature—that is, the disruption of linear narrative—O’Connor’s geometrism, Beck contends, resonates formally with the visual art that inspired modernist literary experimentation in the early twentieth century. Beck further suggests that O’Connor’s representation of space might be seen as a literary example of German critic Wilhelm Worringer’s theory of naturalistic and non-naturalist styles in the plastic arts—a theory that, appearing in 1908, stimulated

early philosophical discussions of modernism.<sup>3</sup> Beck's suggestion deserves further development. Surveying the history of Western art, Worringer proposes that in eras in which humanity feels out of harmony with the cosmos, the artist works to transform "depth relations . . . as far as possible, into plane relations" (140) "and the natural model into rigid, crystalline lines" (43). Art registering such cosmic disharmony through non-naturalistic representation includes the works of primitives who view nature as chaotic, but also the Byzantine and the Romanesque, styles of highly religious cultures for whom the physical is an imperfect mirror of transcendent reality. Early commentators on modernism recognized in Worringer's theory a bridge between twentieth-century artistic abstraction and the cosmic insecurity and fragmentation emerging in modern philosophy, science, and warfare. Applied to O'Connor's fiction, Worringer's theory, by accommodating both secular and religious cultures, provides a bridge of a different kind: between the abstraction of secular modernists and the abstraction of a devout Catholic artist occupying the same cultural milieu. On the one hand, O'Connor's geometric, kinetic landscapes resonate emotionally and spatially with the primitivism and formal ruptures of, say, Picasso, or with the spatial dynamics of William Carlos Williams. For example, the mental landscape of Mrs. May's dream in "Greenleaf"—

the sun [was] trying to burn through the tree line and she stopped to watch. . . . When she first stopped it was a swollen red ball, but as she stood watching it began to narrow and pale until it looked like a bullet. Then suddenly it burst through the tree line and raced down the hill toward her. (519)

recalls the dynamic but strictly sublunary forces at play in Williams's

<sup>3</sup>One of the first English critics to apply Worringer's theory to modernism was T. E. Hulme, who predicted in 1914 that "the re-emergence of geometrical art may be the precursor of the re-emergence of the corresponding attitude toward the world, and so, of the break up of the Renaissance humanistic attitude" (78), and that modern literature would undergo great formal changes as well. In proposing a theory of spatial form in literary modernism, Frank places himself in the critical tradition of Worringer and

“Spring Strains” (1917):

Vibrant bowing limbs  
Pull downward, sucking in the sky  
That bulges from behind. . . .  
(Hold hard, rigid jointed trees!)  
the blinding and red-edged sun blur—  
creeping energy, concentrated  
counterforce—welds sky, buds, trees,  
rivets them in one puckering hold!

Sticks through! . . . (11–13, 16–21)

On the other hand, O’Connor’s “lines of motion” can be seen, like Byzantine art, as a preface to mystery (*Mystery* 113). Shannon Russell notes that “[r]ims, edges, gates, fences, walls, prisons, lots, squares, and circles” proliferate in O’Connor’s fiction both as concrete limits to human action and as mysterious borderlands of the infinite (88–89). O’Connor’s circles, then, are one register of a calculus between human aspiration and transcendence that structures the geometric contours of her landscapes as a whole—a tenuous holding pattern in the narrative foreground ultimately collapsing with the onrush of cosmic forces from an unstable background.

Similar geometric patterns in Tolstoy’s religious fiction establish him as O’Connor’s forerunner in a tradition of religious modernism prone to spatial experimentation. In Tolstoy’s “Master and Man” Brekhunov’s view of the landscape amounts to the most direct line between his property and a wood grove he means to acquire at a good price, whatever the human cost. However, the forces of landscape constantly check Brekhunov’s outlook, warping his vision into circles. This phenomenon is most dramatic after Brekhunov abandons Nikita and attempts to reach the proprietor on his own. The master steers the horse where he thinks the forest is, but he becomes disoriented, and the horse (a great cooperator in this story) begins pushing in the opposite direction. Two times Brekhunov passes some tall stalks of wormwood blowing in the wind.

The reappearance of the wormwood proves that he has been moving in a circle; more profoundly, the wormwood, “desperately tossed by the wind,” strikes a chord in his imagination, “carrying unreasoning terror to his heart” (204). After falling into a snowdrift, the horse abandons Brekhunov, as the master did the servant, and Brekhunov stumbles after the animal, who beats a path to Nikita. This spiraling passage through the storm is a stumbling block to Brekhunov’s private will. The horse’s devotion to Nikita and something happening within the master himself draw the master back to the man he abandoned, effectively collapsing the story’s vast winter landscape to a single point. The master’s transformation is initially evident in his response to the landscape, which is no longer simply a physical space to traverse but a screen upon which his fears and limitations are projected: “this was a real desert in which he was now left alone like that wormwood, awaiting an inevitable, speedy, and meaningless death” (205). Thus, the wormwood is akin to the image of fire that haunts Mrs. Cope and the bull that pesters Mrs. May, uncanny features of landscape that will not dissolve into the protagonists’ personal visions. They symbolize the distances characters need to move internally in order to comprehend them. The collapsing of the private borders characters impose on the land facilitates the internal transgression of boundaries between self and other and between fear and love.

A tragic variation on this pattern of circling and spatial collapse occurs in Tolstoy’s “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” The ambitious farmer Pakhom has contracted with the Bashkir chief (actually the Devil in disguise) to pay one thousand rubles for as much land as he can circumscribe in a day’s walk. Pakhom struggles between his greed for territory and the chief’s iron rule: that he return to his starting point before sundown or forfeit his money. Predictably, the voracious Pakhom traces too wide a circuit. Truncating the third side of a vast quadrilateral, he falls into a headlong diagonal sprint to reach his goal. Pakhom enters into the perimeter of an unwieldy and emerging abstract shape, pitting his personal will against contractual terms that become increasingly natural and even cosmic. As the sun slants toward the horizon, the landscape appears surrealistic, at once telescoping and expanding space:

The sun was close to the rim, and cloaked in mist looked large, and red as blood. . . . Pakhom could already see the people on the hillock waving their arms to hurry him up. He could see the fox-fur cap on the ground and the money on it, and the chief sitting on the ground holding his sides. (226)

Horrified that he will die of exhaustion before reaching the spot, Pakhom thinks of God and is about to stop when his vision of the landscape finds one last outlet for his subjective will: he “remembered that though to him, from below, the sun seemed to have set, they on the hillock could still see it” (226–27). The sustained light of the sun falling upon the spot that will soon be his grave is interpreted by Pakhom not as a final chance to be saved but as one last opportunity to grab land. He reaches the hilltop in the last light but falls dead. Despite his grim ending, Pakhom approaches greatness through the vision that his struggle opens up. His last-chance insight that the sun has not yet set from the perspective of those on the hillock serves as a paradigm for the mystery that O’Connor and Tolstoy repeatedly dramatize: how selfish aspiration can move a character unwittingly toward a remote frame of vision.

Two of O’Connor’s later stories, “Parker’s Back” and “A View of the Woods,” underscore the geometric patterning she shares with Tolstoy but also begin to expose a rift between their modernist visions. In “Parker’s Back” Parker’s landscape is in a sense his own body: he has a fetish for tattoos, and he is obsessed with choosing a final tattoo for his back, the last unornamented space on his body. When Parker is baling hay, his spiraling on the field echoes the spiraling motion in his soul as he meditates upon the empty space on his back:

Parker began at the outside of the field and made circles inward toward it. . . . As he circled the field his mind was on a suitable design for his back. The sun, the size of a golf ball, began to switch regularly from in front to behind him, but he appeared to see it both places as if he had eyes in the back of his head. (665)

Parker hits a rock and crashes into the tree, but when he rises from the accident, he seems to know intuitively how to ornament his back. The

tattoo he chooses, “a flat stern Byzantine Christ” with a penetrating gaze (667), grants him the extra set of eyes that he experienced while spiraling on the field. When he first looks at the tattoo taking shape on his back, Parker sees “a flashing burst of color. . . . It was almost completely covered with little red and blue and ivory and saffron squares; from them he made out the lineaments of the face” (668). In view of Worringer’s theory of non-naturalistic styles, this choice of a Byzantine Christ is significant: taken in its original context, its geometric abstraction calls for a realignment of vision toward a remote transcendence. Parker sees his soul as a “spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion. The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed” (672). Later, he feels “the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (673). This story shares the visual dynamics of “How Much Land Does a Man Need?”—circling, telescoping, dualistic perspective—but unlike Tolstoy’s Pakhom, O’Connor’s Parker survives to realize the possibilities of his vision.

Of course, many of O’Connor’s protagonists are not so fortunate. “A View of the Woods” reads like a post-World War II adaptation of “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” O’Connor’s protagonist, seventy-nine-year-old Mark Fortune, does not want to buy land; he wants to sell it. The land in question is the front lawn of the property he shares with his daughter and her husband Pitts, whom Fortune despises. Fortune wants to sell the lawn to a developer named Tilman, a shadowy and demonic figure who will put in a gas station as the cornerstone of a burgeoning roadside empire. Fortune

wanted to see a paved highway in front of his house with plenty of new model cars on it, he wanted to see a supermarket store across the road from him, he wanted to see a gas station, a motel, a drive-in picture-show within easy distance. . . . There was talk of an eventual town. He thought this should be called Fortune, Georgia. He was a man of advanced vision, even if he was seventy-nine years old. (527–28)

However, his favorite grandchild Mary Fortune Pitts, his spitting image, is dead set against the plan because “[w]e won’t be able to see the woods across the road” (532). These woods begin to haunt him, and at sunset they appear “in his hallucination, as if someone were wounded behind the woods and the trees were bathed in blood” (538). Here again, as in “A Circle in the Fire” and “Greenleaf,” a cosmic background bears down upon a line of trees, O’Connor’s signature hinterland. And as in Tolstoy’s “How Much Land,” the sun shines like blood. Despite this omen Fortune follows through with the sale, infuriating his granddaughter to the point of a showdown. When Mary Fortune resists his beating, Fortune bashes her head against a rock and then in a final hallucination—he apparently suffers a heart attack—sees a “huge yellow monster . . . gorging itself on clay” (546). The monster is an image of the bulldozer described at the beginning of the story, digging into another piece of land Fortune has sold, but it is also a terrifying image of his damnation. The parallels between Fortune and Pakhom as protagonists who contract with the Devil in pursuit of material gain highlight their historical differences: Pakhom is a typical nineteenth-century Russian peasant, aspiring into the landholding class; Fortune is a typical postwar American landowner, capitalizing on suburban sprawl by liquidating the ancestral property.

The difference in historical moment suggests a significant difference between O’Connor and Tolstoy’s modernist abstraction. O’Connor’s spatial experimentation conspires with an emerging consumer capitalism obviously absent in Tolstoy’s rural Russia. Consider the following bit of contemporary landscape in “A View of the Woods”: “Signs up and down the highway announced that Tilman’s was only five miles away, only four, only three, only two, only one; then ‘Watch out for Tilman’s, Around this bend!’ and finally, ‘Here it is, Friends, TILMAN’S!’ in dazzling red letters” (535). By reproducing the progression of billboards on a highway, O’Connor locates within material culture, in the narrative foreground, the kind of spatial foreshortening that she habitually imposes from the background—with blood seeping through the tree line or a bull zeroing in from a remote distance. Invariably, when he justifies the sale of the lawn, Fortune points to the *col-*

*lapse of distance* effected by roadside development: commercial amenities would be “within easy reach” (527); “Then we won’t have to go down the road to get the car filled up,” he argues; we can “just step out the front door” (531); “They would not have to go any distance for gas. Anytime they needed a loaf of bread, all they would have to do would be step out their front door into Tilman’s back door” (538). This collapse of distance depends upon the language of suburban consumer convenience; but it is also the visual effect of the signs in the commercial landscape, strangely mirroring how O’Connor envisions the action of grace. Fortune’s engagement with the spatial dynamics of his historical moment participates in the breakdown of his private vision and ultimately places it in the perspective of eternity.

The same, of course, might be said of Pakhom, a typical peasant on the make, in his insatiable appetite for land: he, too, is an historical type. But there is a difference. Fortune’s appetite takes him more deeply into the material structure of his culture, but Pakhom seems forever in retreat from reality and history. He removes to the distant land of the Bashkirs (which, though geographically situated, attains a mythic cast) and falls prey to the wiles of the Devil, who is not situated historically, like O’Connor’s Tilman, but is a polymorphous supernatural being. Pakhom’s fantasy, after all, is not to collapse space but to maximize the space between himself and everyone else. Pakhom dies in a quasi-mythic realm; Fortune’s final vision depends upon a yellow bulldozer, beside an ersatz lake, digging the foundation of a fishing club—a recognizable slice of the 1950s landscape.

Similar to Pakhom, Brekhunov in “Master and Man” retreats from historical reality, lost in the blizzard and finally fused to Nikita in a mystical union beyond time and space that has been characterized as Buddhist (Trahan 479). Caryl Emerson writes of “the luminescent death scenes in Tolstoy” where “the dying see an inner light, withdraw into themselves and grasp a mystery available to them alone. . . . In all those instances, the process of dying is marked by an increasing self-sufficiency, by a proud solitude and an indifference to outer context” (163). This characterization sounds curiously like O’Connor’s criticism of modernism in general: “Many modern novelists have been more concerned with the processes of consciousness than with the objective world outside the mind” (*Mystery* 158). Although external forces frus-

trate Brekhunov's and Pakhom's megalomaniacal projects, these forces ultimately push the protagonists beyond historical reckoning. Tolstoy was a religious writer on the cusp of a modernism that O'Connor would reject.

Seen in this perspective, O'Connor begins to seem more at home within a postmodern, rather than a modern, context. O'Connor's technique of geometrism and spatial foreshortening is not merely an exploration of consciousness and perception, and not only a way of talking about ultimate things. It also reflects her own post-World War II culture, one that has since been called postmodern for challenging modernist myths of progress, pure form, and totalizing vision by playfully exposing the complexity and contradiction of signs. Everywhere in her fiction O'Connor's vision of grace is open to the ambiguity of signs and the transgression of borders in the contemporary world. By making tattoos central to Parker's revelation, for example, O'Connor fixes upon one of the signature practices of postmodernism. Tattooing stands for all the ornamental strategies—graffiti, artistic quotation, historical pastiche—through which postmodern artists draw attention away from depth, purity, and universality and toward surface, contradiction, and local context.<sup>4</sup> According to Worringer, the development of ornament in Western art was a process of supplementing abstract forms with organic life, culminating in the medieval Gothic style, which fuses abstraction and organism (77, 112). In O'Connor's postmodern Southern Gothicism the vital surfaces of life push her characters from smug retreat toward reckoning with history and society. The Misfit moves from the newspapers and into the grandmother's self-serving myths of purity and historical integrity. The delinquent boys step out of an Atlanta housing project and into Mrs. Cope's sacred backyard, like walking graffiti. The "artificial nigger," a racist statue lifted from the lawns of O'Connor's Southern compatriots, interrupts Mr. Head and Nelson's selfish division and teaches them the lessons of mercy written

<sup>4</sup>Beginning with the example of a tattoo in the novel *Travesty* (1976) by O'Connor's friend John Hawkes, Wendy Steiner discusses ornament in its various manifestations as the defining characteristic of postmodernism. "The ability to entertain complexity and contradiction," she argue further, in regard to Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966), "becomes the precondition for miracle" (64).

into its shifting and contradictory façade. Her characters seem to fall into history and into eternity at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

In considering Tolstoy and O'Connor as religious writers and modernists, then, one arrives at a paradox. As Tolstoy rejected theology and embraced a purely ethical Christianity rooted in love of neighbor, his artistic lights led him toward the abstraction, private vision, and mythic consciousness that would characterize certain types of high modernism. O'Connor's embrace of theology, by contrast, connected her more firmly with the external realities in which her contemporaries lived and moved and thought. Worringer notes that the Gothic style animated abstract forces through "living mechanics" at the same time that Thomistic Scholasticism discovered "living religious sensibility" in abstract thought (113). Following Aquinas's prescription that cooperating grace grant "outwardly the capability of operating," O'Connor resisted modernist subjectivity and embraced the postmodern landscape as "strangely capable" of preparing her characters for grace.

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<sup>5</sup>John F. Desmond makes basically the same point, without reference to postmodernism (106-07). For a discussion of the scriptural and medieval basis of O'Connor's historical vision in "The Artificial Nigger," see Joseph C. Murphy, "Through the Veil: Flannery O'Connor, Dante, and Medieval Exegesis."

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