

Attempted Rejections and Affirmations of the Big Other: Hazel Motes and Flannery O'Connor

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Abstract

*This article examines the conception of Jacques Lacan's big Other in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* (1949). Using as a point of departure O'Connor's refusal to not only acknowledge the merits of psychoanalysis but also to altogether deny the existence of the unconscious, this article explores how this stance is disproved in O'Connor's writing. Furthermore, this article speculates upon the reasons for O'Connor's position in regard to psychoanalysis as stemming from fears in O'Connor's own unconscious. These unconscious fears relate to O'Connor's terminal illness and her subsequent desire to keep her religious beliefs firmly intact.*

Keywords: O'Connor, Lacan, psychoanalysis, big Other, méconnaissance, Žižek, abjection, Kristeva

Flannery O'Connor is well known in literary circles for her exceptional and powerful fiction which explores and attempts to answer timeless questions about the ultimate big Other, God. Despite the insight that O'Connor's work seems to stand to gain from psychoanalytic theory, the author is infamous for her adamancy in refuting not only psychoanalysis but also the very existence of the unconscious itself. Almost fifty years since her untimely death from lupus, the question remains why O'Connor so vehemently defended her work against psychoanalysis.

James M. Mellard theorizes that to understand O'Connor's resistance to psychoanalysis one must shift from Freudian to Lacanian theory and turn one's attentions to *méconnaissance*, which "signifies an illusion of the autonomy of ego and consciousness that

cloaks an unconscious perception of one's fragmentation, of one's self or ego as in fact alienated from or divided against itself" (113). While a prominent reason for O'Connor's *méconnaissance* is her denial of the existence of the unconscious, *méconnaissance* is not a term exclusively applicable to those who maintain such a position. *Méconnaissance* affects most individuals; it is a natural compulsion to want to view one's self or ego as unified and to use this illusion to cover one's unconscious awareness of the ego as split within and against itself. As a young woman of strong faith suffering from a terminal illness, O'Connor was compelled to continue along the path of *méconnaissance* more than the average, healthy individual in possession of something O'Connor lacked, time. As Sally Fitzgerald aptly puts it, O'Connor was "more aware than most that all life must ultimately be defined in the context of death" (Fitzgerald). Hence O'Connor's *méconnaissance* is inexplicably tied up with a desire to maintain her faith until the very end. In denying psychoanalysis and the existence of the unconscious O'Connor employed *méconnaissance* in order to not head down a path which could shake her faith in God, or, in Lacanian terms, the ultimate big Other (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 8).

At first outside of the subject and then internalized, the Other and the Symbolic order in which it resides "determines the subject by its signifying chains, undermining the ego's autonomy" (Leupin 13). The repressed, or desiring, subject first encounters its embodiment in objects *o'* and *o* through which the ego designates itself in a mirrored image (Leupin 2). The *o* is the ego, existing in the Imaginary order. The *o'* also exists in the Imaginary and is the mirror image the infant encounters and by which it initially is self-alienated through its experience of an other, which despite being itself, is so other that it becomes competition for the mother's, the first big Other, gaze (Leupin 2). Through these two objects the ego establishes its "autonomy, unity, and totality," characteristics which, reliant on an incomplete image without actual motor skills, cause the ego to have qualities of a "narcissistic fiction" affecting it forever onward (Leupin 5,6). Through these objects the ego is defined through the imaginary relationship which is the "sum total of projections and identifications," meaning that the ego is what the subject "dreams it to be" (Leupin 6). In distinguishing consciousness the ego reveals that consciousness and the reality it maintains is actually a dream or a "projection or an identification" (Leupin 6). As Lacan puts it, "Reality is what we lean on in order to go on dreaming (Leupin 6)." Therefore the images which the ego surrounds itself with are ones which, as "inadequate representations of desire," are made to "forget desire" (Leupin 6).

In speculating upon O'Connor's rejection of psychoanalysis and denial of the unconscious, one can pose the question of what reality she constructed in order to "go on dreaming." Since O'Connor held strong religious beliefs influencing not only what she wrote about but also how she wanted people to read what she wrote, it seems sensible to take into account her Christianity, and more specifically her Catholicism. O'Connor, being deeply aware of the differences between various Christian denominations and their doctrines, reflects these differences in her work. She particularly challenged Protestantism, dominant in the South where she lived, against her Catholicism, and protested against not only the denomination's foundations, but also the way that it was developing and the doctrine that it expounded. In a letter to Alfred Corn written on August 12th, 1962, O'Connor specifies her complaints against Protestantism by discussing the Catholic belief of free will and the Protestant concept of determinism. O'Connor says,

The Church (Catholic) teaches that God does not judge those acts that are not free, and that he does not predestine any soul to hell – for His glory or any other reason. The doctrine of double predestination is strictly a Protestant phenomenon. The Catholic Church has always condemned it. (Sparrow)

This distinction between Catholicism and Protestantism is explored in *Wise Blood* (1949) through the figure of Hazel Motes, a tortured young man descended from Protestant preachers who struggles with his faith. By painting a vivid picture of the confusion and agony of a man raised believing in the concept of determinism over free will, O'Connor explores the figure of the big Other as portrayed in Protestantism.

Being aware of the construction of a big Other, that is the portrayal of the determinist God of Protestantism, and attempting to reveal it as a fiction, as a wrongful portrayal of God, must have unsettled O'Connor's own conceptions about her own big Other. In seeing how a big Other can be constructed and how it supplements a person's identity, O'Connor must have questioned whether or not her big Other was not merely such a construction. In the end, O'Connor's denial of the unconscious and rejection of psychoanalysis is a defense mechanism meant to protect her own constructed big Other. The reality that O'Connor constructed to "go on dreaming" relied on a system of comparisons between big Others in which her big Other emerged as not only better, but as real. Had O'Connor submitted to psychoanalysis or used it to interpret her own works she would have found her reality shaken and the inner workings of the concept of the big Other revealed.

Slavoj Žižek states, "If God doesn't exist, then everything is prohibited" (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 91). What Žižek means by this statement is that in the event of being told what to do one can retain one's inner freedom and the situation is "not so bad" (92). In a situation where one is not told what to do but merely given an implicit ultimatum drawing power from inciting guilt, there is no possibility of retaining one's inner freedom. This is a situation which includes a "trap of permissive authority" as well as an "even more oppressive demand," one which has not only an "implicit injunction" to do as one is asked but to do it out of one's own free will. In this case one is denied one's inner freedom and is instructed in "not only what to do but what to want to do" (Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* 93).

The restriction of inner freedom in the absence of God, or the ultimate big Other, is exactly what happens to Hazel Motes. Motes' faith is depicted as not only shattered after his experience in the war and finding his hometown deserted, but as unstable beforehand. In Motes' reflection on his grandfather, a preacher, it is revealed that the relationship that Motes had with his faith was one based on guilt. Through Motes' memory the reader experiences the environment that a young Motes was surrounded by, one in which Jesus' death on the cross for the redemption of humanity was a constant topic and reminder of inadequacy. The terrible guilt that is instilled in Motes from an early age stems from this reminder, the reminder that despite his unworthiness Jesus had died for him. Motes recalls his grandfather preaching and pointing to him saying that Jesus would die "even for that mean sinful unthinking boy standing there" (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 20). The grandfather then goes on to articulate the relationship that Motes should have with Jesus, God, and his faith as a whole, saying "What did the sinner think there was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end," a statement which "the boy didn't need to hear. There was already

a deep black wordless conviction in him that the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 20). Motes’ belief that “the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin” attempts to reverse itself with Motes’ foundation of “The Church Without Christ.” Denying Christ’s crucifixion as an act for the redemption of the world’s sins, Motes declares, “I don’t say he wasn’t crucified but I say it wasn’t for you” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 58). Motes’ founding of “The Church Without Christ” is his attempt to shake off the guilt of his Original Sin and the horror of a deterministic salvation. Talking about his church, Motes states, “Ask me about that church and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 111). In this statement Motes indicates his desire to be rid of the burden of Christ’s death for his salvation, a salvation that, according to the Protestant concept of determinism, is already predetermined.

The big Other for Motes is not the figure of a benevolent God the Father, but a vengeful, frightening figure to be avoided. For Motes, Jesus and God are not instruments of assurance but rather dangerous concepts which make him tentative and unsure. Reflecting on the figure of Jesus he has been taught to know, Motes sees “a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 21). This imagery suggests that Motes’ relationship to his faith is completely cultural and not embedded in a way that signals the presence of true belief and a genuine relationship with God. Rather, this imagery suggests that all of Motes’ faith is based on guilt and fear, coupled with a compulsion to follow the faith despite a tremendous feeling of distrust. In imagining himself walking on water just as Jesus had done, yet only able to keep from drowning through ignorance of his position, Motes reveals the entire mechanism of his belief.

Wise Blood narrates the time when Motes has supposedly cast off his faith, but in truth he never had any. The point that O’Connor seems to be making with Motes is that the “faith” he experienced previously through the sermons of his grandfather and father was little more than a sense of fear and guilt resulting from the story of Christ’s death on the cross. This story affects Motes in this way because he believes in Christ’s death on the cross as God’s payment for the redemption of humanity’s sins. Yet in this interpretation the question to whom did God pay this price remains. As Žižek eloquently expresses: “The death of Christ means something very radical, in all other religions we trust in God, the death of Christ means that God trusted us. This is the gift of freedom. God entrusts the fate of His own creation to us” (Žižek, “Why Only an Atheist”). This relates back to the concept that if God does not exist then everything is forbidden rather than allowed. Therefore if one believes in the death of Christ and God, then what one effectively believes in is freedom and the free will that O’Connor advocates over post-Reformation denominations’ determinism.

It appears that O’Connor’s God and Motes’ God are radically different big Others and that a great deal of *Wise Blood* is geared to exposing Motes’ big Other as exactly that, a figure who “governs whatever may be made present to the subject,” and “the field of that living being in which the subject has to appear” (Lacan 203). If this is indeed at least partially O’Connor’s goal, then she admits the existence of the unconscious and the benefits of psychoanalysis. In portraying Motes as a character tortured by a faith that is so culturally embedded that even in the face of conscious denial it continues to torture him, O’Connor

reveals her belief of the construction of a big Other that forever after determines the subjects' actions and sense of self. Even in her comments about Catholicism and Protestantism O'Connor reveals this attitude. In a letter to Dr. T.R. Spivey she defines a Protestant as someone who "holds the view that for the first fifteen centuries after the Pentecost, the things pertaining to Christian theology and practice were wrong and had to be changed" and that this change occurred when "God eventually revealed the truth to some privileged and/or outspoken individuals living in 16th century Europe and England" (Sparrow). As a Catholic, O'Connor did not accept either of these beliefs. In stating the held beliefs of Protestantism as resulting from direct direction from God while simultaneously holding the opinion that this interaction never occurred, O'Connor admits her belief that this God, this Protestant big Other, was created by individuals. What O'Connor does not address is the question of her own big Other, which she holds to not be a construction but an absolute being which "really" exists.

Helpful in examining both Motes' and O'Connor's big Others is Žižek's essay "The Big Other Doesn't Exist." The essay begins by considering the treatment of the Oedipal myth in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* where a "primordial father" is killed and prevents the incestuous act by returning as his Name, creating the law of symbolic prohibition necessary for the transition from nature to culture to occur. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* "accounts for the structural necessity of the parricide: the passage from direct brutal force to the rule of symbolic authority, of the prohibitory law which is always grounded in a disavowed act of primordial crime" (Žižek, "The Big Other" 1). Yet for Žižek and Freud this logic is not enough without "a positive act of Will," a necessity which causes Freud to add a final detail in *Moses and Monotheism*, the creation of two different paternal figures replacing the previous two depicted in *Totem and Taboo*. These two figures are, instead of the "presymbolic obscene/non-castrated Father-*Jouissance* and the dead father who bears the symbolic authority," the "Old Egyptian Moses who introduces monotheism and the notion of a universe as determined and ruled by a unique rational Order" and "the Semitic Moses" who has a "jealous God who displays vengeful rage when He feels betrayed by his people" (Žižek, "The Big Other" 1). Therefore the father murdered by his sons and followers is not the "obscene primordial Father-*Jouissance*" but the "rational father embodying the symbolic authority who personifies the rational structure of the universe" (Žižek, "The Big Other" 1). This results in the return of the symbolic authority in "the guise of the jealous, vengeful and unforgiving superego figure of a God full of murderous rage" (Žižek, "The Big Other" 1). This is a God who "says NO to *jouissance*" and "banishes the universe of traditional sexualized wisdom," employing a rule which is based on orders rooted in non-logic, in the statement "It is like this because I say it is like this!" (Žižek, "The Big Other" 1). For Lacan, this forbidding God is the "real father" and the "agent of castration," meaning symbolic castration indicating the space between the big Other and *jouissance* and the fact that the two can never be harmonized (Žižek, "The Big Other" 1).

For Motes, this big Other of a forbidding God who abolishes the "universe of traditional sexualized wisdom" and is the agent of castration is all too real. Even in his disavowal of God, Jesus, and faith in general, Motes continues to feel the symbolic efficiency of his big Other, a big Other who will never allow the space between him and Motes' *jouissance* to close, forever making Motes feel inadequate for the simple fact of his already determined fate resulting from his inadvertent original sin. At first glance it may appear that Motes'

and O'Connor's big Others are radically different, something which the author no doubt intended in her attempt to criticize Protestantism and bring her character closer to salvation through a more Catholic mentality. Nevertheless, upon further examination it seems clear that Motes' big Other is also O'Connor's, no matter how much she may attempt to veil this with her well-crafted fiction.

The most glaring evidence for this is O'Connor's treatment of sexuality and her admission of her significant lack of knowledge in the area. Stating "I suppose what you work hardest on is what you know least" in reference to sexuality, O'Connor reveals that her big Other is also the agent of castration which demolishes the "traditional sexualized wisdom." O'Connor tries to solve this problem of lack within herself by writing, "turning on a missing signifier" that is associated with her own identity (Mellard 124). Although the word "sex" is never used in *Wise Blood*, perhaps it is interesting to point out that Motes drives an Essex, which separates into the words "Es," used in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis to denote unconsciousness, and "sex," a word O'Connor never actually uses but which (both the word and what it stands for) seems to be a crucial signifier in the matrix of O'Connor's identity. Regardless of this most likely coincidental albeit intriguing element, the fact that O'Connor never uses the word "sex" indicates a "specific absent-but-present signifier" which indicates the "determinative roles of the signifier associated with the Oedipal fiction determining a subject's ego identity (Mellard 124)." This identity is involved in the subject's desire and demonstrates where the phallic signifier becomes Lacan's *objet petit a*, "the object that causes desire and in causing desire constitutes the subject" (Mellard 124). For O'Connor, Motes becomes this signifier, her *objet petit a* indicating "a piece of the real in the body tied to one's deepest 'self'" and which is typified by both absence and presence (Mellard 124). O'Connor shows her awareness of this absence/presence in her letters to friends concerning both Motes and Enoch Emery, another character in *Wise Blood*. While O'Connor has no problems discussing Enoch, Motes, as *objet petit a*, is more difficult – all the more so because Motes is the signifier who speaks for O'Connor's conscious, speaking "I" and moderates between her ego-ideal and the big Other (Mellard 125). This big Other is the excluding God who returns not as His Name but as a symbolic authority which says no to *jouissance*, castrates symbolically, and never allows for a resolution between itself and the subject's *jouissance*.

In contrast to Lacan's *objet petit a*, Julia Kristeva's "abject" exists presymbolically with abjection "preserving what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be" (Kristeva 10). Since the separation referred to is the infant's separation from its mother's body during its birth, the maternal body becomes an important element in Kristeva's take on psychoanalysis. Unlike Lacan, who places negation and identification in the Mirror Stage, Kristeva argues that both of these elements are already present in what she terms the "maternal function" (Oliver 3). This means that "the negation and identification that are essential to human subjectivity are already operating within the maternal function prior to the subject's entrance into language" (Oliver 3). Naturally such an implication directly opposes both Freud and Lacan who attribute the infant's entry into language and subjectivity to a paternal function.

Critics have often noted the violence that O'Connor brings down upon her characters, pointing simultaneously to the author's own admission that "violence is strangely

capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (O'Connor, "Essay 1963"). While O'Connor's conscious purpose in the use of violence is "to reveal the need for grace in a world grotesque without a transcendent context" (Katz 54), perhaps unconsciously O'Connor uses violence to point towards the stage of the maternal function identified with abjection, a stage that "marks the transition between material rejection and symbolic rejection" and signals "the transition between dependence on the maternal body and independence from the maternal body" (Oliver 4). In her unconscious gesture towards abjection through her use of violence, O'Connor brings up the issue of the maternal body, which, Kristeva maintains, foreshadows the Law of the Father and the subject's entry into the symbolic (Oliver 3). Motes, in functioning as O'Connor's *objet petit a*, coordinates the author's own desires to maintain the image of her big Other and is thus denied his own *objet petit a*, never being allowed to resolve the conflict between his big Other and his own ego-ideal. This results in Motes' eventual death after a significant period of self-inflicted violence. In the absence of the maternal body and the plentiful presence of the paternal body, *Wise Blood* seems to pass over abjection and deal only with the Mirror Stage and the Symbolic. Indeed, while all of O'Connor's characters in *Wise Blood* are preoccupied with the looming paternal body of the big Other, the maternal body in each of their cases is made conspicuously, physically absent.

Sabbath Lily Hawks, the daughter of a scamming preacher pretending to be blind, is forever connected to her physically absent mother through her name, given to her by her mother before she died. Sabbath is doomed to be constantly reminded of not only her absent mother, but also of the irony that she, born on a holy day and named accordingly, is in fact a bastard. Sabbath divulges this fact to Motes, openly telling him, "Him and her wasn't married [...] and that makes me a bastard, but I can't help it. It was what he done to me and not what I done to myself" (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 126). Tellingly enough, Sabbath attributes being a bastard to something her father did to her, not her mother or even both of her parents. In O'Connor's world it is the father that has all the power while the mother is restricted to a physically absent yet present figure. This relates to O'Connor's desire to explore the big Other, a paternal figure that exists in the Symbolic. Nevertheless, the exclusion of mothers in *Wise Blood* suggests that O'Connor's characters constantly teeter on the brink of, indeed seem to desire, a return to the "archaism of pre-objectal relationship." In Sabbath's case the mother is physically absent yet otherwise present; this implies that although Sabbath physically experienced "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be," in having her mother constantly physically absent yet present, this separation remains incomplete.

Sabbath goes on to tell Motes about a letter she had written to Mary Brittle, a woman that "tells you what to do when you don't know," asking her whether she should "neck or not" since as a bastard she will not "enter the kingdom of heaven anyway" (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 127). Mary answers Sabbath by saying that while "light necking is acceptable," she feels that Sabbath's "real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world," requiring a reassessment of her "religious values" in order to determine if they are compatible with her needs (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 127). This advice, given by a woman, is promptly ignored by Sabbath, who writes back saying, "What I really want to know is should I go the whole hog or not? That's my real problem. I'm adjusted okay to the modern world" (O'Connor, *Wise Blood* 128). This response is exemplary of Sabbath's devotion

to yet another paternal figure, that of the big Other or God. While she desires the advice of a maternal figure, ultimately she follows the ruling of the paternalistic figure of God who, in the Protestant tradition following determinism, has absolute rules that cannot be changed according to the “modern world” and mandates “religious values” that follow a strict doctrine rather than complying with the needs of an individual’s life.

The incident with the “new Jesus,” a mummy stolen from a museum, and Sabbath strongly illustrates both the overwhelming paternal authority that rules Sabbath’s life and the effect of the physically absent yet otherwise present maternal body. Kristeva maintains that “the traditional religious accounts of motherhood, particularly the myth of the Virgin Mary, can no longer explain, interpret, give meaning to, motherhood” (Oliver 49). According to Kristeva, these stories have been used to obscure the “unsettling aspects of maternity and the mother-child relationship” (Oliver 50). In what Kristeva terms “the cult of the Virgin,” maternity and mothers are controlled through violence, “like sacrifice the cult of the Virgin contains the violence of semiotic drives by turning violence against them” (Oliver 50). For Kristeva, the image of the Virgin obscures “the tension between the maternal and the Symbolic” (Oliver 50). In biblical tales, the Virgin is miraculously impregnated by “the Word, the Name of the Father, God,” a tale which guarantees paternity while “fighting off the remnants of matrilinear society” (Oliver 50). With no mother of her own, damned in eternity through no personal fault, and sexually promiscuous as a result of her inevitable damnation, Sabbath seizes upon the opportunity to present herself as the new Jesus’ Virgin mother. Having received a package from Emery for Motes, Sabbath unwraps it without bringing it to Motes. Upon unwrapping it Sabbath sees the new Jesus mummy and reacts not as one would expect, with disgust and horror, but first with an “empty look, as if she didn’t know what she thought about him or didn’t think anything” and then with affection, brushing his hair into place, placing him in her arms and speaking sweetly to him, as if he were a living baby (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 198). In reacting to the new Jesus mummy in such a way, Sabbath takes up the role of the Virgin mother. Her child becomes one conceived by the paternal authority of the Name of the Father, the big Other, God. In turn Sabbath, still metaphorically attached to her own mother, does not experience the mummy as abject, having never gone through that which the abject preserves, that which “existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship.”

Both Sabbath and Emery use the same language when talking about their mothers. When Sabbath says that after naming her, her mother “turned over in her bed and died and I never seen her” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 126) she echoes Emery’s comment of “I ain’t never seen who my mother is” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 53). In contrast to his absent mother, Emery’s father “looks just like Jesus” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 53). Having attended a “Bible Academy,” Emery claims that he knows “a whole heap about Jesus” and tells Motes that if he wants to know anything about Jesus he should ask him (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 52). Despite his supposed education, Emery claims that he does not “go in for a lot of Jesus business” and that the time he spent at the academy almost drove him crazy (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 44). Although Emery claims to be unconcerned with Jesus, he is nonetheless ruled by his “wise blood,” which he has in common with his Jesus look-alike father (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 82). Emery follows the demands of his daddy’s wise blood even while telling himself, “I don’t want to do it” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 148). Once Emery has completed the task of delivering the new Jesus to Motes, he has, “in spite of

himself,” an expectation “that the new jesus was going to do something for him in return for his services” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 204). This expectation is fulfilled when Emery’s wise blood releases him, permitting him to “revert to a free, animalistic state, as he dons a gorilla costume and finds the happiness of a gorilla ‘whose god had finally rewarded it’” (Jonathon D. Fitzgerald 37). Emery’s wise blood, which dictates actions to him that he does against his own will, illustrates the antinomianism of Protestants, a belief which denies the authority of the Pope under the Protestant doctrine of *sola videri* (Jonathon D. Fitzgerald 35). As a Catholic, O’Connor was obviously opposed to this practice, writing in a letter to John Hawkes, “Wise blood has to be these people’s (Protestants) means of grace – they have no sacraments” (O’Connor, *Collected Works* 1107). The lack of sacraments and trust in external authority create a space for wise blood to act “in the absence of real religious authority” as “the only standard by which one lives” (J. D. Fitzgerald 36). Despite O’Connor’s attempt to use Emery’s wise blood as a critique of antinomianism, the fact that wise blood is a characteristic shared by Emery and his father, who happens to look “just like Jesus,” creates the presence of an inward paternalistic figure acting in the role of big Other. It is not just a case of Emery going against his will due to some mysterious unknown internal element, but a case of Emery going against his will in response to the specific demands of “his daddy’s wise blood.”

After stealing the “new jesus” Emery turns to him for compensation, receiving it at last in being allowed to “revert to a free, animalistic state” (Jonathon D. Fitzgerald 37). This reversion returns Emery to a pre-Symbolic state wherein the “primal repression,” or the “ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat. Without *one* division, *one* separation, *one* subject/object having been constituted (not yet, or no longer yet),” is no longer at work (Kristeva 12). Emery, in his abandonment of the paternal function of his father’s wise blood, and through the reward of the paternal figure of the “new jesus,” returns to a state where primal repression no longer functions to distinguish him from an animal. Through the violence he experiences in following his father’s wise blood Emery experiences the abject which “confronts us [...] with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of *animal*” (Kristeva 12). Emery’s shedding and burying of his clothes is not “a symbol [...] of burying his former self” but rather a matter of knowing that “he wouldn’t need them anymore” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 211). The description of a lack of symbolic value in the act of shedding and burying his clothes, replaced by a matter-of-fact knowledge of their uselessness, signals Emery’s loss of primal repression. In the passage that follows, O’Connor writes: “In the uncertain light, one of his lean white legs could be seen to disappear and then the other, one arm and then the other: a black heavier shaggier figure replaced his” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 212). This is the last reference to Emery as a person; henceforth O’Connor only refers to Emery as “it.” Emery is no longer a conscious human being but an animal that cannot understand the distinction between itself and others, a fact illustrated in the surprise Emery the gorilla feels when he tries to shake a couple’s hand and instead sends them off screaming (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 213). Similarly, Emery as a gorilla shows no disappointment, sadness, or other emotion at being run from. Instead he takes the couple’s place on a rock and merely “stares over the valley at the uneven skyline of the city” (O’Connor 213). No longer under the command of his father’s wise blood, Emery ceases to have a big Other. At the same time

he ceases to be a “speaking being always already haunted by the Other” (Kristeva 12), and therefore without the primal repression which the abject calls into question.

Unlike Emery and Sabbath, Motes cannot describe his relationship with his mother in terms of absolute absence. Nevertheless, during the time narrated in the novel Motes’ mother is already dead, having died when he was sixteen. Coming home from the army to find his town and house deserted, Motes imagines his mother coming into the house with “that look on her face, unrested and looking; the same look he had seen through the crack of her coffin” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 26). As Motes lies in his train bed he recalls seeing his mother’s funeral and “the shadow that came down over her face and pulled her mouth down as if she wasn’t any more satisfied dead than alive” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 26). Asleep, Motes dreams of his mother, “terrible, like a huge bat, dart from the closing, fly out of there, but it was falling dark on top of her, closing down all the time. From inside he saw it closing, coming closer closer down and cutting off the light and the room” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 26–27). Here Motes empathizes with his mother, dreaming of himself in her position while reacting to her corpse which does not “signify death” but illustrates what one must “thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 3). It is “[t]he corpse, seen without God and outside of science” which is “the utmost of abjection” (Kristeva 4). The fact that it is his mother’s corpse combines this “utmost of abjection” with the abject that is present in one’s “personal archeology” with the “earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before existing outside her, thanks to the autonomy of language” (Kristeva 13). The “hold of *maternal* entity” grips Motes throughout the novel; he is never able to properly separate from his mother who, despite being dead, has a continued presence in his life. This presence is indicated by Motes’ mother’s glasses, which, other than a Bible, are the only other thing that he takes from his hometown of Eastrod when he leaves to enter the army (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 22). Motes does not read the Bible frequently, but when he does he wears his mother’s glasses. Furthermore, when invited by fellow army members to go to a brothel he puts on his mother’s glasses and tells them “he wouldn’t go with them for a million dollars and a feather bed live on; he said he was from Eastrod, Tennessee, and that he was not going to have his soul damned by the government or any foreign place” at which point “his voice cracked and he didn’t finish” (O’Connor, *Wise Blood* 22–23). It is noteworthy that when Motes wears his mother’s glasses to read the Bible his eyes soon tire, and that when he puts them on to deny an invitation he is unable to finish. This inability to go on is representative of Motes’ inability to function while still attached to his maternal entity. The fact that he puts the glasses on voluntarily points towards his desire to please, not his mother, but his father, grandfather, and the ultimate paternal figure, God. For Kristeva, “in order to support the transition through abjection into the Symbolic order the infant needs a fantasy of a loving imaginary father” (Oliver 4). This is because although “the child can serve its mother as token of her own authentication; there is, however, hardly any reason for her to serve as a go-between for it to become autonomous and authentic in its turn” (Kristeva 13). Yet for Motes there is no “loving imaginary father,” only a big Other whose return is not the Name of the Father but a symbolic authority forbidding *jouissance*, castrating symbolically, and making a resolution between itself and the subject’s *jouissance* impossible.

Žižek repeats Lacan’s claim that “God is not dead today, He was dead from the very beginning except He didn’t know it.” This asserts that the big Other’s *nonexistence* is

equal to its position within the symbolic order or “the order of symbolic fictions which operate at a level different from direct material causality” (Žižek, “The Big Other” 2). This nonexistence is precisely what both O'Connor and Motes cannot come to terms with, and O'Connor works out her frustrations with this through Motes.

Žižek claims that the only person for whom the big Other “really” exists is the psychotic or “the one who attributes to words direct material causality,” a statement which is not applicable to Motes (Žižek, “The Big Other” 2). Although Motes does behave strangely throughout *Wise Blood*, it is not a result of a true belief in the big Other's existence, but just the opposite: the struggle that Motes, and by association O'Connor, faces in the problematic fact that the big Other does not exist. Though both are somewhat unconsciously aware of this, they are unable to come to terms with it because both symbolic fiction and authority take hold of a subject's reality with a vise-like grip. An example of this is what Žižek calls “the culture of complaint” which involves a subject blaming the big Other rather than admitting that it does not exist, “as if impotence is no excuse” (Žižek, “The Big Other” 2). This “culture of complaint” is a paradox by which the subject becomes more dependent on the big Other rather than less. This is definitely applicable to Motes since he spends the novel blaming the big Other for every misfortune that befalls him while simultaneously attempting to claim that the big Other does not exist. Despite this, Motes is helplessly and inextricably caught in the symbolic fiction and despite what he physically says he continues to believe in the big Other, if only through assigning blame to it.

Žižek concludes his essay with stating that the big Other's nonexistence as “an efficient symbolic fiction” results in the subject turning to one of two things: either the subject becomes more attached to “imaginary simulacra and sensual spectacles,” or the big Other's nonexistence causes the subject to turn to violence in both the Real and in their own body (Žižek, “The Big Other” 3). At the end of *Wise Blood* Motes does seem to go the latter way after his realization of the big Other's nonexistence, blinding and torturing himself by wrapping barbed wire around his chest and walking with glass in his shoes. This need for violence can be read as O'Connor's portrayal of the negative outcomes of following a faith based, not on free will, but on determinism as well as an overall critique of Protestantism. Although this is most likely how O'Connor wanted her novel to be read, it appears that there is much more at work than a simple critique of a faith that was not her own. In creating Motes, O'Connor created a mediating signifier between her ego-ideal and the big Other, not the big Other of Protestantism which tortures Motes but the big Other of her own Catholic faith. Faced with imminent death and besieged by a life of pain, O'Connor needed to create such a mediator in order to explore her relationship to her own faith and keep the big Other's nonexistence, along with psychoanalysis and the unconscious, at a safe distance.

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