ANALYSIS

"Everything That Rises Must Converge" (1961)

Flannery O'Connor

(1925-1964)

"There is a fateful encounter between a Negro woman and another of Miss O'Connor's foolish but well-intentioned elderly daughters of the Old South. The bus they are riding on is integrated, and they discover to their mutual disgust that they are wearing the same hat. Both women are also visibly living through their sons—a little Negro boy, fancifully dressed, and a bitter young man, Julian, who despises his mother's fallen heritage as much as he secretly yearns to repossess it.

Devious and sadistic, he torments her by [seeking] acquaintance with the Negro passengers and dreams of giving her a stroke by marrying a Negro girl. The stroke, however, comes when they all get off at the same stop and Julian's mother tries to give the child a penny. Furious, the Negro mother lashes out and knocks her down. Julian, in turn, vindictively bullies her until suddenly he realizes she is dying there in the street. He experiences a rush of love, but his mother is beyond that: '[Her eye] remained fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing and closed,' and he is left alone, 'postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.' The story is so resonant with irony, so dense in social and moral implications, that it undermines complacency and cant on all sides of the racial question. All three people are right and wrong, but Julian is most wrong because his motives are corrupt. The story turns a stock political answer into a religious question."

Theodore Solotaroff
The Red Hot Vacuum and Other Pieces on the Writing of the Sixties
(1965; Atheneum 1970) 176

"'Everything That Rises Must Converge' has a fine ending, Julian's 'entry into the world of guilt and sorrow' when his mother has a stoke occasioned by a Negro woman who rose and converged with her. It is beautifully foreshadowed from the story's first sentence."

Stanley Edgar Hyman
Flannery O'Connor
(U Minnesota 1966) 27

"'Everything That Rises Must Converge'…offers many reminders of the earlier 'The Artificial Nigger.' Julian accompanies his mother on Wednesday nights to the downtown 'Y' for her reducing classes…. [He] observes his mother's gestures of condescension toward a Negro child with disturbed embarrassment…. [The story] is another attempt to chronicle the disproportion between the Hulgas and the 'good country people'….The gesture with the penny and its rejection are part of the pattern of 'hazy charity' which we have seen so often in Flannery O'Connor's work."

Milton J. Friedman
The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Connor
eds. Friedman and Lewis A. Lawson
(Fordham 1966, 1977) 21-22

"Although Julian in some respects is blinder than his mother, she does not see, as he does, that the child's mother will take her charitable gesture as an indication of condescension. Julian is right—condescension is truly part of her motivation; but his mother is unable to make such subtle distinctions. In similar fashion, she cannot understand Julian's resisting her attempts to identify him and herself with the defunct glories of their ancestors… Julian has no charity, no love, and no sympathy for his mother, who has done everything for him…. He scoffs at his mother's values, even though he secretly knows the truth of her contention that one's identity is rooted in the past and the family traditions that have been lost; he dreams of the decayed mansion that had once been the family's home, but his pride permits him to feel that his mother could not appreciate its meaning as well as he.

The epiphany which shatters the insularity of his mocking interior life is effected when Julian creates a situation that he thinks will teach his mother a lesson in racial tolerance. The lesson is Julian's, when he learns that the attack upon his mother by the Negro woman whose child she has patronized brings on a fatal stroke. Knowing personal responsibility for the first time, Julian calls upon his mother tenderly but futilely and in that moment crosses over into maturity and knowledge."

Carter W. Martin
The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Vanderbilt 1968) 39, 132

"[Contrary to critic Marion Montgomery] Miss O'Connor nowhere suggests that Julian is rising through his superior intellect; she makes him ludicrous and ineffectual throughout…. Julian never recognizes his real similarity to the Negroes he patronizes in his smug liberalism… Julian is a poseur throughout, and his mother is a pious hypocrite whose death is no more tragic than is Hulga's loss of her leg in 'Good Country People.' Death need not be elevated to the tragic to achieve profound implications… As comic characters Julian and his mother may be observed from outside in all their weakness and silliness…. To judge Julian's treatment of his mother is beside the point…

Part of the humor…occurs with the mother's realization that a Negro woman who boards the bus is wearing a hat exactly like hers. Earlier in the story she had confided to Julian that her own hat was too expensive; she had paid a high price so she would not meet herself on the street. Miss O'Connor emphasizes the sameness of the two women by repeating exactly the description of their hats…. The mother…cannot understand that it is no longer appropriate for white women to give bits of change to Negro children…. Another repetition emphasizes Julian's similarity to a Negro man on the bus. Julian hid behind a newspaper… When the Negro boards the bus, he also hides behind his paper and ignores Julian's efforts to be friendly…. The child's mother sits next to Julian, and he realizes that the two women have, in a sense, exchanged sons, but he also realizes that his mother will not see the symbolic meaning of the scene….

Miss O'Connor's use of the ticklish racial elements suggests her recognition, with Tielhard, that though man is subdivided into races, he is now tending toward greater, not less, unity…. The concept of the 'point omega' [God], the 'divine centre of convergence,' is the key to Miss O'Connor's affinity for the thought of her scientific contemporary [Tielhard]…. Her orthodoxy confirms that Julian's eventual entry to the world of guilt and sorrow prepares him for grace and redemption…. Miss O'Connor's convergences are both naturalistic and mystical; they point to the divine life and our participation in it....

Although Julian apparently does not rise or converge, his faith in external, compulsory unification of the races 'grows' through his confrontation with the mystery of death… The story clearly implies that his emergence…will be 'accompanied by a more advanced form of spontaneity and spiritual energy.' Not only will he have achieved greater vision for himself, but his vision will far exceed that of his mother and the Negro woman who has been her fateful adversary…. Such expansion, according to Tielhard, is the goal of life; Miss O'Connor's suggestion of that experience is intense, for she leaves Julian running in place, straining toward a cluster of lights which recede from him as he runs…. He must learn to acknowledge reality, for he can no longer feed his self-esteem with 'liberal' actions."

Leon V. Driskell & Joan T. Brittain
The Eternal Crossroads: The Art of Flannery O'Connor
(U Kentucky 1971) 105-06, 138-43

"'Everything That Rises Must Converge'…takes its title from her close reading of Teilhard de Chardin. In this story a bus trip taken by Julian, a false liberal, and his racist mother serves as the metaphor of journey which results in death and disorientation. Julian, an effete college graduate who considers himself victimized by a mother who lives in a world of imaginary antebellum [before the Civil War] constructions, is obliged to accompany her every Wednesday evening to a reducing class, since she refuses to ride on integrated buses by herself. Julian, critical of others, is not aware of his own capacity for evil, and as he embarks on his journey it becomes his burden to discover his own limitations and defects. When an immense Negress and her child board the bus, Julian is exasperated by the polite games which his mother plays with the little boy, and despite his frantic protestations she insists on giving the child a shiny new

penny after they get off. The Negress, infuriated by such 'tokenism,' attacks Julian's mother with a pocketbook, precipitating a stroke. Julian, shaken by the possibility of loss and by the depth of his own denial, is suddenly confronted with a world that is empty and incomprehensible….

In *The Phenomenon of Man* Teilhard de Chardin posits a world in motion—a world…which through profusion, ingenuity, and other aggregates of growth is moving from diversity toward an ultimate unity, which he terms Omega point [God]. Chardin…stresses the need for people to converge upon each other and to personalize themselves through love. This impetus toward union is designed to effect a convergence of the material and spiritual; we are drawn together in order to merge with Omega, which is incarnated in Christ. But to reach Omega one requires charity, in the Christian sense of *caritas*, an ingredient that is lacking among the people in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge.' Nevertheless, the story radiates beyond the strict enclosure of form because of Chardin's thesis. The entire movement of the story is toward convergence—of black and white, or mother and son—but this convergence is never quite accomplished, although the quest for unity remains an elusive and tantalizing possibility.

Convergence is the process whereby man's tendency toward extreme individuality and disintegration is arrested by a unifying force. Julian, however, is only vaguely aware of this force through the frightening revelation of his mother's death. Flannery O'Connor, following Chardin and other writers of the modern Catholic renaissance such as Romano Guardini, sees great danger…in the propensity of men to think of themselves as monads which never converge…. Omega is the emergence of that which previously was there but was unrealized. Perception of Omega is consonant with the illumination which comes from mystical ecstasy."

Gilbert H. Muller
Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque
(U Georgia 1972) 69-70

"'Everything That Rises Must Converge' witnesses the obsolescence of the 'old manners' and the failure of the new ones… This story presents a pseudo-aristocratic mother and her son, Julian, both cut off from the society in which they live. Neither has entered into 'the world of guilt and sorrow,' which, for Flannery O'Connor, is the only world there is…. Each is out of touch with social reality…

Julian…relates to the world around him by cynical misjudgments. Caught between two cultures—the old, inaccessible; the new, undesirable—he effectively withdraws from life…. He deprecates his mother's gentility, never realizing that the same heritage in him has soured into cynicism….expressed in his ambivalent view of the Godhigh mansion: 'He never spoke of it without contempt or thought of it without longing'…. The 'decaying mansion' is a symbol of the old culture of the South, which is no longer inclusive enough to embrace the new relationships which Southern industrialization has brought about'…. 'Negroes were living in it'…. A Negro's choosing to sit beside him is 'objectionable,' although he takes pride in deigning to sit beside a Negro….

The mother, relying on the 'old manners' and the graciousness which are a part of her culture, encounters a hostile reality…when a huge Negro woman hits her with a large red purse… She holds fast to gracious manners even though she unwittingly displays them in a condescending way…. Giving a penny to a little Negro boy is 'as natural to her as breathing.' She would have presented it to any little child who played peek-a-boo with her on a bus. But the black woman's reaction to her benevolence demonstrates that Julian's mother is out of touch with the society in which she lives. She is innocent; her 'sky-blue' eyes are as 'untouched by experience as they must have been when she was ten.' Her memories of the past make her the most naïve of racists; she is perfectly willing for 'them' to rise—'on their own side of the fence'…. During the bus ride to the Y reducing class, Julian's mother discovers that the fence has been torn down and, more disconcerting, that her son revels in her discomfiture…. Her new awareness is revealed in O'Connor's descriptions of her eyes…. Her eyes take on a 'battered look'…. 'The blue in them seemed to have turned a bruised purple'…. [Dying] she instinctively retreats into the secure world of her youth, in which her son has no place. As he kneels over her crumpled figure, her one eye 'fixed on him, raked his face again, found nothing, and closed'….

Her son, who prides himself on his acceptance of the 'new South,' is actually more estranged from society than his mother is. Her death presages and insures his entrance into the world of suffering humanity…. The story shows the 'rising' of Julian's mother, and, by implication, his own. Their convergence—the convergence of heart and mind which they represent—would inaugurate the 'new manners' on which Flannery O'Connor relied to save the South."

Kathleen Feeley, S.S.N.D.
Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock
(Rutgers 1972; Fordham 1982) 101-05

"Julian, a college graduate and typewriter salesman with a dubious future as a writer before him, is O'Connor's version of the liberal intellectual; it is his fervent desire, on the bus ride, to teach his mother a lesson about race relations, to correct her antique notions of white superiority, and to force her to see the new demands of a changing era…. Mrs. Chestny…feels now, with the onset of unfamiliar integration, that 'they [blacks] should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence'…. She is knocked down, violently stunned, and (a masterful stroke) seems to regress to her secure childhood, calling, indeed, for her old 'darky' nurse, Caroline. Julian, however, is even more deeply stunned... For when he discovers that she has not merely been taught a lesson she deserved but may be dying, his feelings of disdain and hatred toward her violently reverse themselves, and he realizes for the first time his profound dependence on her….

The mother recalls her descent from the Godhighs (one of O'Connor's many wonderfully explicit, comic names) and lives with the innocent security that she is still, somehow, a divine being, though now in exile. In that sudden intrusion of an unexpected violence on her life, when the abstraction 'Negro' is powerfully individualized, the habit of success and self-assurance is broken, and Mrs. Chestny pathetically regresses to her childhood Eden. Julian, on his part, prides himself on knowing that he lives, truly and tragically, in a fallen world. But the luxury of his torment and martyrdom (he has been comically compared, by O'Connor, to Saint Sebastian) and his presumptuous certainty of himself—of knowing 'who he is'—are suddenly overturned by the sight of his mother….

Reinforcing Julian's ironic reversal is the…deception the young man has indulged himself in. While he has outwardly scorned his mother's dream of her grandfather's house, that house has in fact been the focus of all his secret longings, and appears regularly in his own dreams—not in its present condition ('Negroes were living in it') but 'as his mother had known it'…. His attachment to the house is not as fatal to Julian as his failure to admit that attachment and to assess its value to him in the world he is forced to live in. Instead, he has let it divide his consciousness of reality, producing a rent in his person—a longing for the past, on the one side, and a forced embrace of the future, on the other. Through this rent he falls at the end of the story—into a fearful present…. [O'Connor's] concern was less with uncovering the tensions in race relations…than with uncovering the self-deceptions and evasions that keep us from recognizing our identities in a context rather larger than the immediately contemporary one."

Miles Orvell
Invisible Parade: The Fiction of Flannery O'Connor
(Temple U 1972) 7-10

"Again and again, O'Connor utilizes [the] 'snowball' technique….Julian's mother…first annoys the black mother and her child on the bus, then pursues them down the street in a determined attempt to deliver her inappropriate gift, and ends dying on the sidewalk…. O'Connor seemed determined not to let any soft liberal 'sentimentalism' weaken her fiction. Her attitudes toward the blacks are set in the same harsh lines of judgment that she displays toward the whites. Universal guilt by definition extends to all races and permeates all blood lines. If the black woman on the bus errs in her violence against the mother, then Julian too is at fault for his failure to empathize with the plight of those who are too old to change….

The title…is taken from Teilhard de Chardin, whose study of the biological processes of evolution convinced him that evolution itself is a continuing movement of various species into higher and higher forms of consciousness. Ultimately, these combine with or converge upon one another, in preparation for the final fusion of all being with supranatural consciousness at the 'omega point' [God]. O'Connor gives the title an ironic twist: convergence in her title implies collision; and the stories deal, therefore, with such 'convergences' in various areas: racial, social, and spiritual. The stories concerned with racial conflict

reveal that, in the black's ascent of the social ladder, he eliminates certain of his white antagonists; for, as with Darwin, death is the price of failure to adapt to changing conditions in society….

Julian's mother…is imbued with traditional Southern orthodoxy in all its various facets. She takes the black drive for integration as a personal affront, but she bears the black man no ill will as long as he 'stays in his place' (in the back of the bus and on the other side of the fence). She is a woman with an amazing capacity to select the data of her personal 'reality.' A descendant of the Godhighs, an aristocratic slaveholding family, she maintains unperturbed her image of herself as a daughter of the aristocracy, even though she lives at present in a shabby neighborhood in a state of poverty barely genteel. Her illusions extend, of course, to her son Julian, whom she loyally introduces as a budding author who is getting his start by temporarily selling typewriters. Objecting to the changing social positions of the blacks, she ignores the external evidence of that change; and that perversity costs her her life.

Julian, in contrast, prides himself on his enlightened views. He deliberately seats himself with black riders on the bus, and he desperately longs to strike up an 'intellectual' conversation with his black acquaintance to demonstrate his unprejudiced and hence superior state of mind and spirit. He deliberately provokes his mother by flaunting her social standards, dallies with the thought of joining a 'sit-in,' and imagines with secret delight the pleasure of bringing a black woman home as his fiancee.

In truth, the son is a duplicate of his mother. Though outwardly he scoffs at her claims of aristocratic connections, inwardly he treasures the knowledge of his own superior heritage. To escape the pressures of the vulgar, uncomprehending society about him, he withdraws into an inner dream world, which is in fact an imaginary room of the lost family mansion. His ambitions to be an author obviously have little or no chance of realization. And it is unlikely that there is, as he claims, not a single person in a radius of three hundred miles worth knowing. He eagerly sought contacts with the blacks on the bus show the extent of his illusion. His 'professional' black people turn out to be undertakers, and his chosen 'equals' present him lottery tickets as they leave.

The mother is a representative of conservative Southern society, and the son—in his own view—of the younger progressives who seek to expiate the sins of the parents by openly accepting their 'inferiors.' The contest is played out ultimately in the drama of the final bus ride, where the opposing attitudes are tested with severe consequences for both mother and son. On the bus, the whites seek contact with the blacks (each in his own terms), which the latter pointedly reject. Julian, to emphasize his broad-mindedness and to annoy his mother, borrows matches from the black man next to him…. Julian's mother will not let the little black boy sitting beside her alone, and she tries to strike up a conversation with his mother, all the while making it obvious that she considers these people to be her inferiors. The black woman's resentment is pronounced. The mother, like Julian, is guilty of a gross intrusion of privacy, but neither perceives the fact that the overtures are unwelcome.

The hat plays a key symbolic function in the bus scene…. (1) it is a monstrosity (purple flaps flanking an empty green cushion) and (2) it is, in the mother's economy, an expensive purchase (she could have paid the gas bill with the $7.50 the hat cost). The fact that the black woman has also selected the hat reveals that the blacks' economic status is rapidly overtaking that of the whites' and that the blacks have won as much freedom to pursue absurdity as the whites. The hat clearly signifies the 'doubling' of the white and black women. The exchange of roles is further suggested by the seating arrangements, whereby the women seem to 'exchange sons.' The white woman clearly resents her son's being positioned next to the black mother, but the latter is obviously even more vexed by her own offspring's proximity to the white matron. Julian, of course, enjoys the situation immensely, and he hopes that the entire experience—especially the twin hat—will prove a good lesson to his mother.

The action which provokes the final assault upon Julian's mother is her thoughtless presentation of money to the little black boy after they all leave the bus. When she successfully bestows her penny upon the child, she is totally oblivious of the insult she delivers with the coin: the gesture is 'as natural to her as breathing.' The black woman is not disposed to accept the insult of charity. Her response is immediate, violent, instinctive: 'Then all at once she seemed to explode like a piece of machinery that had been given

one ounce of pressure too much.' She aims a powerful blow with her fist and sends the mother to the sidewalk…. Julian…is initially pleased that his mother has finally gotten the lesson she deserves….

Julian thus learns that human imperfections are extended to all in the democracy of the races; that the deficiencies of age and social shot-sightedness can beget consequences totally out of proportion to their intentions; and that, in order to embrace his new friends, he may be required to sacrifice his own family. A lesson is, indeed, implicit in the black woman's violent action; but the pupil is Julian who is brought at last to instruction of guilt and sorrow…. O'Connor…is impartial in her stern evaluation and judgment; to her, the biased Southerner clinging to outmoded perception, the enthusiastic liberal eager to demonstrate his goodwill, and the sullen black resentful of white overtures are all examples of pride, absurdity, and vice. The work is a warning and an admonition to all involved—there is no major culprit to be singled out and set against the others. The villain is lack of compassion, failure of sympathy, and, as such, it resides in the souls of all, black and white, young and old."

Dorothy Walters
Flannery O'Connor
(Twayne 1973) 33, 126-30, 134

"Julian attempts unsuccessfully to befriend a Negro man and indulges in malicious glee when a large Negro woman boards the bus wearing a hat identical to the one his mother has on…. [He] wants desperately to distinguish himself from everything in the South which he finds morally, intellectually, and aesthetically repugnant: its racism, its nostalgia for the glorious past, its (to him) petty concern with manners, its barren intellectual life, its insufferably banal social intercourse. (Julian is cast from the same mold that produced the rebellious 'artistic' or 'intellectual' sons of 'The Enduring Chill,' 'The Comforts of Home,' and 'Greenleaf.' Julian, Asbury, Thomas, and Wesley make up a quartet of angry, frustrated individuals caught in 'late adolescent' impotence so acute that they can direct their hostility only against their protective, and oftentimes patronizing and controlling mothers.)…

Julian wants to be different, and since everything about the South which affronts his sense of decency and decorum is symbolized by his mother, Julian wants especially to be different from his mother… As it is impossible to insult the entire Southern ethos, Julian is reduced to the expediency of humiliating and insulting his mother…. [Yet] what he thinks he detests, he also loves and longs for. What he believes he is totally free of, he is, in fact, fearfully dependent upon….

It must be conceded that there is something exasperating about his mother. She is one of those legendary Southern matrons of 'aristocratic' birth who, though forced to live in relative poverty, continues to insist upon a distinction which she believes birth has conferred upon her….though she must use the now integrated public transportation system and must associate at the YWCA with women of a lower social class… It is her ardent faith in the primacy of manners…which is one of the sources of the conflict between Julian and his mother…. He maintains that with the new fluidity of class structure, his mother's graciousness counts for nothing….

Julian…is in fact far more pitifully confused than his mother. In him Flannery O'Connor has drawn a devastating portrait of the young white 'liberal' Southerner who is doing all of the supposedly right things for the wrong reasons. Conceited in his assurance that he is free of his mother's prejudices and her unrealistic attachment to a dead past, Julian betrays in every gesture and word his thoroughly ambivalent attitudes toward the principal objects of her bigotry (Negroes) and her nostalgia (the ancestral home)…. In some way reminiscent of Quentin Compson's tortured exclamation at the conclusion of *Absalom, Absalom!*, 'I don't hate it, I don't hate it' (the 'it' referring to the South)…. Julian is a child of the 1950s and the sixties, and, as such, faces the quite different problem of establishing personal identity in a South for which neither the grandeur nor the guilt of the past are ever-present, haunting realities…. Wishing to assert his independence from his mother, he vehemently proclaims his independence of the cultural heritage from which she derives *her* identity….

Remote as Julian's mother's world may be from reality, Julian's own fantasy world is even more remote. With his arrogant sense of superiority ('he realized he was too intelligent to be a success'). Julian's habitual way of dealing with the unpleasant aspects of life is to retreat 'into the inner compartment of his

mind…a kind of mental bubble' from which he may judge the intellectual bankruptcy of the rest of mankind. Somewhat like Hulga and very much like Asbury of 'The Enduring Chill,' Wesley of 'Greenleaf,' and Thomas of 'The Comforts of Home,' Julian suffers from…self-doubt and self-pity and can be protected only by maintaining an uncommitted and superior attitude toward the world. At the same time subjecting the world to withering scorn for its failures and fearing to engage the world in creative struggle, Julian withdraws into his bubble where the self is free to judge without making itself vulnerable to judgment…. But while Julian thus needs his mother, she also poses a constant threat, to the extent that she is able to withstand his attacks and, through simply being what she is, to insinuate the possibility of some radical discrepancy between his idealized image and the actuality of his life. Ultimately, therefore, he must attempt to destroy her or destroy *for* her that system of values which makes her life possible….

Julian now fantasizes about various ways of hurting his mother, though always the conscious intention is 'to teach her a lesson'…. Julian uses his putative tolerance and freedom from racial bias as a weapon in the struggle with his mother. What is far worse, he *uses Negroes* for the same purpose. Significantly, Julian has 'never been successful in making Negro friends'; the reason for his failure is not difficult to locate, since he all too obviously wishes only to accumulate 'some of the better types…ones that looked like professors or ministers or lawyers' to bolster his always tenuous hold upon his self-image as a liberated representative of the 'new South.' Julian's own latent prejudice begins to show itself when a huge, fierce-looking Negro woman, who could not possibly be mistaken for a member of the Negro intelligentsia, boards the bus and settles in a seat next to his. Julian is 'annoyed.'

Quickly his annoyance turns to elation as he sees the symbolic appropriateness of the two women having 'swapped sons' when the woman's small child sits next to his mother. Julian's triumph is completed when he notices that the Negro woman's hat is an exact match of the one his mother is wearing for the first time. Reveling briefly in his mother's distress, Julian discovers their true relationship after she has been struck to the ground by the hostile Negro woman. Attempting to reinforce the 'lesson' with what sounds like a rehearsed lecture, Julian assures his mother that the fury she has just witnessed is not that of a single 'uppity Negro woman' but rather that of 'the whole colored race which will no longer take your condescending pennies.' His speech is lost on his mother, who, calling for 'Grampa' and Caroline (the Negro mammy who had cared for her as a child), willingly submits to 'a tide of darkness' which carries her swiftly back to the ordered world of childhood and thence to death.

Julian, who had moments before wished to prove to his mother she could not expect to be forever dependent upon him, is compelled at last to recognize how total has been his dependence upon her. Crying 'Mamma, Mamma! He throws himself beside her, but 'Mamma,' whose gaze had earlier scanned his face but recognized nothing there, lies motionless. Last seen racing toward lights which appear to recede beyond his grasp, Julian postpones momentarily 'his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.' On this unmistakable Hawthornesque note the chronicle of another American Adam is concluded….

In the narrative of Julian and his mother there is a true convergence, although not a simple one. As the title suggests, the story concerns both rising and converging. Before their bus ride, Julian's mother had spoken of the propriety of Negroes rising, 'but on their side of the fence.' Her encounter with the outraged woman attests to the rising which has already occurred, as well as the fragility of the fence and the difficulty of maintaining it. But a convergence, albeit a violent one, does take place, and there are numerous hints besides the obvious one of the identical hats, that Julian's mother and the Negro woman are more alike than either would care to admit. If nothing else, the story's action foreshadows a convergence such as that envisaged by Teilhard, who speaks of 'courage and resourcefulness' as necessary ingredients in the struggle to overcome 'the forces of isolationism, even of repulsion, which seem to drive [men] apart rather than draw them together'…. According to Teilhard de Chardin, growth toward unity with others is the spiritual direction of evolution and is a process to which those with 'expanded consciousness' contribute. It is, moreover, the true end of man….

Though the results of this particular convergence are quite the opposite of those anticipated by Teilhard when mankind achieves its unity in Christ, and though it would seem that here there is only reinforced isolation and repulsion, emphasis should perhaps be placed upon the pain and cost of both rising and converging. Such emphasis is certainly congruent with Miss O'Connor's belief that redemption is never

easy and always involves suffering. The frustration and anger of the Negro woman and her courage imply a depth of spirit out of which might someday come the 'resourcefulness' requisite for genuine convergence… As in other renditions of the fortunate fall, Julian's calamity will eventually lead, so all the evidence indicates, to 'growth of consciousness,' to raised sight, to a risen spirit."

Preston M. Browning, Jr.
Flannery O'Connor
(Southern Illinois U 1974) 100-108

"O'Connor wrote a story once called 'Everything That Rises Must Converge'…. [said Alice Walker] Everything that goes up comes together, meets, becomes one thing. Briefly, the story is this: an old white woman in her fifties… This middle-aged woman gets on a bus with her son, who likes to think he is a Southern liberal… He looks for a black person to sit next to. This horrifies his mother, who, though not old, has old ways. She is wearing a very hideous, very expensive hat, which is purple and green."

"Purple and *green*?" [said Alice Walker's mother]

"Very expensive. *Smart*. Bought at the best store in town. She says, 'With a hat like this, I won't meet myself coming and going.' But in fact, soon a large black woman, whom O'Connor describes as looking something like a gorilla, gets on the bus with a little boy, and she is wearing this same green-and-purple hat. Well, our not-so-young white lady is horrified, out*done*."

"I *bet* she was. Black folks have money to buy foolish things with too, now."

"O'Connor's point exactly! Everything that rises, must converge."

"Well, the green-and-purple hats people will have to converge without me."

"O'Connor thought that the South, as it became more 'progressive,' would become just like the North. Culturally bland, physically ravished, and, where the people are concerned, well, you wouldn't be able to tell one racial group from another. Everybody would want the same things, like the same things, and everybody would be reduced to wearing, symbolically, the same green-and-purple hats."

"And do you think this is happening?"

"I do. But that is not the whole point of the story. The white woman, in an attempt to save her pride, chooses to treat the incident of the identical hats as a case of monkey-see, monkey-do. She assumes she is not the monkey, of course. She ignores the idiotic-looking black woman and begins instead to flirt with the woman's son, who is small and black and cute. She fails to notice that the black woman is glowering at her. When they all get off the bus she offers the little boy a 'bright new penny.' And the child's mother knocks the hell out of her with her pocketbook."

"I bet she carried a large one."

"Large, and full of hard objects."

"Then what happened? Didn't you say the white woman's son was with her?"

"He had tried to warn his mother. 'These new Negroes are not like the old,' he told her. But she never listened. He thought he hated his mother until he saw her on the ground, then he felt sorry for her. But when he tried to help her, she didn't know him. She'd retreated in her mind to a historical time more congenial to her desires. 'Tell Grandpapa to come and get me,' she says. Then she totters off, alone, into the night."

"Poor *thing*," my mother says sympathetically of this horrid woman, in a total identification that is so Southern and so black.

"That's what her son felt, too, and that is how you know it is a Flannery O'Connor story. The son has been changed by his mother's experience. He understands that, though she is a silly woman who has tried to live in the past, she is also a pathetic creature and so is he. But it is too late to tell her about this because she is stone crazy." [No, she is dead.]

"What did the black woman do after she knocked the white woman down and walked away?"

"O'Connor chose not to say, and that is why, although this is a good story, it is, to me, only half a story. You might know the other half…."

"Well, I'm not a writer, but there *was* an old white woman I once wanted to strike…" she begins.

"Exactly," I say….

Alice Walker
"Beyond the Peacock: The Reconstruction of Flannery O'Connor" (1975)
In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens
(Harcourt/Harvest 1984) 49-51

“The conflict between mind and heart is personified in the interaction of Julian and his mother. The convergence announced by the title takes place on at least three levels: son against mother, new generation against old, and race against race…. Julian, the victim of a demonic self-sufficiency, necessarily rejects his mother because he has no faculty for relating to her love, however imperfect it may be. Julian feels that he has turned out well in spite of his mother. He considers himself enlightened on the race question; his mother’s condescending attitude appalls him so much that he likes to sit next to Negroes on the bus ‘in reparation…for his mother’s sins.’

If ‘condescension is truly part of her motivation,’ as [one critic] states, and not principally Julian’s warped view of her, her maternal and class instincts are infinitely superior to her son’s outright and deliberate disdain for anyone lacking his education and ‘tolerance.’ It is quite clear that Julian wants to hurt his mother more than make amends to God or Negroes, for he experiences ‘an evil urge to break her spirit.’ Moreover, the exaggerated liberal values of his generation clash violently and inevitably with the gentility and graciousness of the dying older order. Although ‘both Julian and his mother envision the ancestral house as a focus of yearning,’ they do not, as [one critic says] ‘*both* imagine it ‘as an unfallen state.’ For Julian’s mother it is indeed a reminder of mythical days, but Julian’s visualization of it is more a willing confirmation of the fall. For him it is a place of isolation from the masses. It is materialization of the ‘mental bubble’ that is his refuge whenever he cannot ‘bear to be a part of what [is] going on around him.’

The racial convergence takes place on the integrated bus to the Y, when the Negro woman, caught in the rising tide of an impatient oppressed minority, lashes out against the patronizing generosity of the gradualistic minority. There is a twofold ironic exchange of identity. The black woman is wearing the very hat that Julian’s mother had purchased in an effort to keep from meeting herself ‘coming and going.’ His mother’s ‘innocence,’ that ‘for a moment Julian had an uncomfortable sense of,’ apparently preserves her son from a recognition of their shared emblem of human equality: ‘An amused smile came over her face as if the woman were a monkey that had stolen her hat.’ But there is no question of Julian’s realization that he and the little boy, Carver, have exchanged mothers. Julian and the Negro woman are obviously related through a bond of mutual irascibility and impatience, and the fact that the black woman’s attitude is more justifiable does not lessen their deserved relationship. Carver and Julian’s mother, on the other hand, apparently understand each other as mother and son should since they both have active hearts.

When Julian’s mother gives Carver a penny, the Negro woman strikes her with her bulging red pocketbook. Despite the fact that Julian had tried to warn his mother, it is clear that the ugliness of his own antipathy for her has been objectified in the violence of the onslaught. Julian’s tragic responsibility for his mother’s death had begun with his first deliberate attempt to provoke her, when he left her side to sit next to the Negro across the aisle from them: ‘He felt his tension suddenly lift as if he had openly declared war on her.’ From that moment on, her blood pressure, apparent in her ‘unnaturally red’ face, literally rises to the breaking point so that her presumably fatal stroke comes quickly as a lasting tide of reproach and righteous judgment against Julian and his kind.

Julian’s desire to spell out the lesson for his mother is changed to sorrow and confusion when the impact of his mother’s seizure reaches him. Her heart has been dislodged from its moorings by the force of the blow. As she lumbers pitifully down the street, ‘with a headlong movement in the wrong direction,’ she seems unable to determine Julian’s identity. She mutters simply that she is going home rather than to the Y. Her last request, the poignant ‘Tell Caroline to come get me,’ becomes the grace of judgment as well as conversion for Julian. The extreme irony of her request stems from the fact that, as a possible punishment for her, Julian had ‘imagined his mother lying desperately ill and his being able to secure only a Negro doctor for her.’ His mother spontaneously prefers the reassuring presence of her former black maid to the dubious comfort of her ‘stranger’ son. Her single functioning eye, which rakes his face for the last time and finds nothing, implies a judgment even more scathing than her words achieved.

As his mother crumples to the pavement, the horror of his sin breaks upon him like the ominous dawn of a dark day of grief. Julian, in panic, runs down the street for help, but the tide of darkness ‘seems to sweep him back to her, postponing from moment to moment his entry into the world of guilt and sorrow.’ We are led to believe that Julian will, indeed, enter that world. Nevertheless, the extent of his sin, measured by the horrifying judgment leveled against him, must necessarily prolong his period of purgation.

The title of the story is taken from Teilhard de Chardin's *The Phenomenon of Man*… Although riddled with irony, the story ultimately yields a fundamentally positive meaning. In each of the areas of conflict, there is a higher level of convergence that reflects the forward thrust of the evolutionary process, however painful and gradual a process 'Tell Caroline to come get me' implies. There is no growth, Teilhard explains, without diminishment. Julian's mother dies without solace and only thus wins his love and respect. The request for Caroline triggers his realization that, for all its defects, the older generation had more genuine personal feeling for Negroes than his with its heartless liberalism. And the gratuitous violence of the black woman's action contrasted with the anticipated comforts of a Negro nurse intensifies Julian's painful awakening to the complexity of racial tension. The condescending heart is less dangerous than the martial mind. Though slow perhaps in its adjustment to change, the heart gives a surer sense of ultimate direction than the mind's 'principles'."

John R. May
The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor
(U Notre Dame 1976) 94-97

"The view of city houses…as 'bulbous liver-colored monstrosities of a uniform ugliness… 'That was your black double' the son…archly confides to his dying mother, without considering the implications for himself, for if the large Negro woman of this story embodies a side of life his mother has refused to see, then to whom does her dependent little boy correspond?'…. In their will to power, Asbury, Calhoun, and Julian are essentially no different from O'Connor's other intellectuals nor, ironically, from those intensely practical parental figures against whom so many of them are in revolt…. 'You aren't who you think you are'…[Julian] smugly tells his mother (neither, of course, is he), and the remark might serve as a motto for all her central figures, [who have gaps between] the fabricated and deeply false persona and the true self…. It is not the possibility of belief that is at issue, but the inescapability of knowledge…

Reason leads not toward revelation but away from it: the rationalistic tendency is one of abstraction from the earth, from the body, from the concrete world altogether, an attempt to withdraw into a self-created and self-contained 'mental bubble.' The imagination, on the other hand, feeds on the world of the senses, and her climactic visions present that knowledge as experience, supernatural awareness that comes in the images of the natural world. This double affirmation of both the material and the spiritual, in opposition to the barren abstractions of reason, is perhaps O'Connor's ultimate fidelity to the sacramental commitment of her own imagination."

Frederick Asals
Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity
(U Georgia 1982) 68, 96, 129, 134, 209, 214

"In 'Everything That Rises Must Converge,' written in 1961, when the civil rights movement was in full swing and desegregation in the South an actual fact, and blacks had begun to externalize those thoughts and feelings of anger they had repressed so long, she finally saw fit to write a story in which a black would take a key, and very active, role. In the light of what she does, we can be in no doubt of the black woman's sentiments. The mother and son on the bus believe that they hold very different attitudes toward the new dispensation. The mother, a silly but kindly, hard-working and gaily self-sacrificial widow, is nevertheless unreconstructed in her views on racial matters: 'They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence.' She is no more nor less than a product of her culture and, in particular, of her generation, and she will never be able to change, but she is in fact a much purer soul than her surly son.

Julian 'realizes that he is much too intelligent ever to be a success.' He believes himself to be enlightened, liberal and realistic; actually he cares nothing for the blacks themselves, and his apparently respectful friendliness toward them is chiefly a means of tormenting his mother. He is a typical O'Connor weakling, hopelessly but restively dependent on his mother (and secretly he shares her outlived romantic values), but his cruelty to her is even more gratuitous than that of most such sons we encounter in the stories. Among other fantasies, he daydreams of 'giving her a stroke' by bringing home a 'beautiful, suspiciously Negroid woman' and confronting her with his engagement.

The convergence of the old white culture and the rising blacks is suggested by the identical new hats the two women are wearing. This delights the son, until he sees that his mother's discomfiture has dissolved into amusement. The black woman is accompanied by her own small son, who falls into an instant and joyous flirtation with the white mother. The two innocents plainly relish their unself-conscious rapport, until the huge and bellicose black mother recalls the child with the significant command, 'Quit yo' foolishness before I knock the living Jesus out of you.'

When the young man and his mother reach their stop, which turns out to be that of the black pair as well, the incorrigibly naïve old lady prepares to do something 'as natural to her as breathing'—give the child a nickel. Her son realizes that this will be an affront (although she would have done the same thing had the child been white), and tries to stop her. She is determined, though, and while she can only find a penny in her bag, she offers it to the delighted child. The encounter becomes a confrontation, and ends in tragedy, with the blindly malevolent young man left at the portal of the 'world of guilt and sorrow,' facing self-revelation that will either make or break him.

Large social issues as such were never the stuff of Flannery O'Connor's work, and even here her concern is with the personal effects of a social situation, and the encounter with devastating self-knowledge, together with larger realities, in the individual. It is interesting to note that O'Connor seems more willing to excuse the fatuous old lady than she is the son. The author pointedly implies that, for all her unrecognized sins, she is on her way 'home' (which for O'Connor is always the cloudless kingdom of God), and that, like a child herself, she has called for a long-remembered black nurse to come and take her there, where they can live together in peace and love. In the wars between the generations, which she recounts in so many stories, O'Connor is not particularly on the side of the young, despite the maddening foibles, and even evils, of the old; she deals out justice with an even hand."

Sally Fitzgerald
Introduction
Three by Flannery O'Connor
(Penguin/Signet 1983) xxiv-xxv

"The reprise of the 1950s continues in 'Everything That Rises Must Converge' (1961). Young Julian's mother wears a crazy hat which defines some aspect of herself trying to escape a narrow, hard existence. The hat, inanimate, and later duplicated on the head of a black woman, is a statement his mother must make despite her better judgment; for it expresses something she could never articulate. It is a form of life. Just as Julian's social egalitarianism, political liberalism, lack of racial prejudice infuriate his mother, so he is infuriated by the ridiculous hat. When he sees the same hat on a black woman who boards their bus, he thinks that his mother will be shamed into learning her lesson; but on the contrary, she is able to smile. Her will prevails. Her generation, slyly, gets back at his; but the means, as in so much of O'Connor, is an inanimate object that becomes charged with totemic power, usually ringing some change in the individual. It is not necessarily a form of salvation, but neither is it simply mechanical…. The 'convergence' of the title is somewhere outside Julian's philosophy, but there, in the world beyond his bubble, that achievement of values lies. Salvation? Redemption? Heaven? Perhaps…"

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions: 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 235

"The title is, as O'Connor tells us, 'a physical proposition that I found in Pere Teilhard and am applying to a certain situation in the Southern states and indeed in all the world.' It is a story that she also says 'touches on a certain topical issue in these parts and takes place on a bus.' Teilhard in fact sees the basis for racism in the individual's desire to differentiate him or herself from others—a failure to 'converge' that is 'all the more insidious…[because] flattering to collective egotism--keener, nobler, and more easily aroused than individual egotism.'

Julian's actions in this story confirm his isolation from others rather than his convergence. He separates himself from his mother, only condescending to take her to her weight class once a week. He establishes barriers against 'the general idiocy of his fellows' by existing in 'a kind of mental bubble,' where he feels 'safe from any kind of penetration from without.' His idea of the perfect neighborhood is one of widely

separated houses—a sharp contrast to his mother's neighborhood where all the homes seem 'of a uniform ugliness'… An egotistical, hypocritical intellectual incapable of self-knowledge, Julian's sense of superiority ironically rests on the idea that he is *not* classist or racist. And yet he has never been successful in making a black friend, dreams of being engaged to a Negroid-*looking* woman in order to disturb his mother, and imagines making friends with upper-class blacks, perhaps a 'distinguished Negro professor.' Finally, he is actually annoyed when on the bus a Negro woman sits next to him—until he sees this as a way to punish his mother. O'Connor raises the question of whether the larger human family will ever 'converge' when individuals deny their own immediate family.

Julian's contempt for his mother is worse than his mother's contempt for the blacks, although she too is in 'reduced' circumstances morally as well as materially. She wishes to 'reduce' her weight and gain in social status when she ought to be gaining in sympathy for her community. Both Julian and his mother pretend to self-knowledge (she claims, 'if you know who you are, you can go anywhere'), but neither one clearly understands their own motivations…. Julian's mother…depends on societal stereotypes defining her 'kind of people.' Hierarchy, not convergence, represents security for her. She avoids sameness and buys the expensive hat in order to avoid seeing herself 'coming and going'—to avoid acknowledging her connection to others.

While Julian and his mother assert 'difference,' O'Connor establishes patterns of sameness. The black woman and Julian's mother wear the same hat. The dark/light, mother/son pairs established when the two mothers seem to switch sons on the bus suggest sameness. Julian and his mother are alike in their failure to develop: the mother seems like 'a little girl'…and Julian ends in the stance of a little boy crying out for his 'Mamma.' Both the mother and the son dream of the past. He accuses her of living in 'her own fantasy world' of 'imaginary dignity,' but he also lives according to a romanticized version of himself cultivated in his own 'mental bubble.'

These two characters differ primarily in that Julian is more self-centered and selfish than his mother. She at least is unselfish in that she supports her son while ignoring his failures, whereas her son feels 'an evil urge to break [his mother's] spirit.' He succeeds. Julian's aggressively critical stance toward his mother develops until the mother and son can no longer recognize each other. She faces his contempt for her and sees 'nothing familiar about him.' Her identity depends on his, and when she can't 'determine his identity,' she can't determine her own. She suffers a stroke, and he is described as 'looking into a face he had never seen before.' She then searches his face, looking for recognition but finding 'nothing.'

The ending of this story emphasizes the human tendency toward interdependence and the idea that an inability to recognize sameness and thus to 'converge' or 'love,' results in destructiveness. Hatred expressed between family members and between different social groups is only overcome when individuals suffer moments of insight coincidental with moments of 'guilt and sorrow'—the final words of this story taken directly from Teilhard de Chardin."

Suzanne Morrow Paulson
Flannery O'Connor: A Study of the Short Fiction
(Twayne 1988) 82-84

Michael Hollister (2015)