THE PENNY AND THE NICKEL IN
"EVERYTHING THAT RISES MUST
CONVERGE"

In O’Connor’s story, the violent climactic “convergence” of black and white races is precipitated by Julian’s mother offering a coin to a little Negro boy. Her customary gift to black children is a nickel,1 but she has been able to find only a cent in her pocketbook. That the fateful coin is a penny, and that it is newly minted, are both emphasized by O’Connor through being twice mentioned (pp. 19-20). The author thereby hints the significance with regard to “Everything that Rises ...” of the Lincoln cent and Jefferson nickel (the two coins current in 1961 when O’Connor’s story was written).2 The designs of these pieces suggest a nexus of meanings relating to the social, racial and religious themes of “Everything that Rises ...”

The obverse of the Lincoln cent bears the portrait of its namesake, to the left of which is the motto “LIBERTY.” The chief feature of the reverse is a representation of the Lincoln Memorial. These three details have an obvious relevance to O’Connor’s sympathetic concern with the “rise” of Southern blacks from slavery towards true freedom and socio-economic equality. Thus, the features of the Lincoln cent just mentioned suggest (1) the freeing of Negroes by the “Great Emancipator” and (2), by extension, the activity of the Federal Government in O’Connor’s own day to ensure the rights of Southern blacks. Regarding the second, the Supreme Court decision of 1954 and its aftereffects (including the sit-ins of 1960) constitute the immediate historical background for the action of “Everything that Rises ...”3 The story suggests how the crumbling of the “Jim Crow” system was making possible a new “liberty” for Negroes in the South. Blacks have gained both a greater physical freedom in their world and increased opportunities for socio-economic mobility. This twofold access of “liberty” is exemplified by the well-dressed Negro man with the briefcase who sits with the whites at the front of the bus (p. 12). The new possibilities for betterment opening to blacks are intimated not only by the abovementioned details of the Lincoln cent but also by its “bright” (p. 20), shiny freshness.


3. For the history of racial integration in the South during the years 1954-61, see Benjamin Muse, _Ten Years of Prelude_ (New York: Viking, 1964).
Julian's mother is unaware of the ways her "new penny" (p. 20) suggests the historical "rise" of Southern blacks, and would be dismayed if she recognized such implications. She represents the reactionary element among white Southerners who want to reverse history with respect to race relations. Julian's mother would like to return to the days of segregation ("They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence," p. 7) and seemingly even to the era of slavery ("[Blacks] were better off when they were [slaves]," p. 6). The retrograde desire of Julian's mother to reduce Negroes to their antebellum servitude stands in ironic contrast to her penny as recalling Lincoln's emancipation of blacks. Furthermore, the date on the obverse of the "new" (presumably 1961) cent is exactly a century after the start of the Civil War, and almost a hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863). The 1961 date thus underlines just how antiquated are the racial views of Julian's mother.

As opposed to the Lincoln cent, the Jefferson nickel in part suggests the conservative and patrician outlook of Julian's mother, the quasi-mythical old South in which she psychologically dwells. In particular, Jefferson's life strikingly parallels that of the aristocratic grandfather whom Julian's mother so reveres. Both men were slaveholding plantation owners, and both were governors of their home states (p. 6). It is by virtue of such distinguished ancestry that Julian's mother identifies with the antebellum Southern aristocracy, to whom she romantically attributes a lofty preeminence balanced by "graciousness" (p. 6). That combination of qualities is suggested by the palladian architecture of Jefferson's "stately home" Monticello, depicted on the reverse of the nickel. Monticello further ties in with the Godhigh country mansion as a symbol of the aristocratic heritage and accompanying social pretensions of Julian's mother. Just as the somewhat Olympian Monticello suggests the superior position of the white aristocracy in a class and racially stratified order, so does the plan of the Godhigh house (the owners being elevated above the black cooks who work on the ground floor, p. 6). It is from such an apparently secure social eminence that Julian's mother looks down on Negroes with a blend of snobbish condescension, "graciousness" and paternalistic benevolence. That set of attitudes is expressed by Julian's mother in bestowing small change upon black children. The Jefferson nickel is especially appropriate as the usual coin for such largesse because it implies the identification with the old Southern aristocracy that largely determines the racial views of Julian's mother.

However, the aforementioned connotations of the Jefferson nickel are in contrast with meanings implied by the motto "LIBERTY" on the obverse of the coin. The slogan brings to mind Jefferson's chief fame as a champion of democratic ideals. In relation to "Everything that Rises...", Jefferson's advocacy of "liberty" and equality is (1) basically antithetical to the cherished social assumptions and racial views of Julian's mother and (2) essentially in keeping with the movement towards freedom and equality for blacks implied by the Lincoln cent. Concerning the second point, Jefferson

4. The house is located on a levelled mountain top.
although a slaveholder himself found the South’s “peculiar institution” morally repugnant.\(^5\) He accordingly devoted considerable effort to advocating the gradual emancipation of Negroes,\(^6\) and he likewise freed some of his own blacks at his death.\(^7\) Jefferson’s enlightened attitudes towards slavery, which anticipate Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, are diametrically opposed to those of Julian’s mother. Far from seeing slavery as morally repellant, she believes that blacks were “better off” in servitude, and is proud that an ancestor owned two hundred Negroes (p. 6). Such sentiments are undercut through the Jefferson nickel by implicit contrast with the views of one of America’s foremost political and social thinkers.

Another detail of both the Lincoln cent and Jefferson nickel which is relevant to “Everything that Rises . . .” is the motto “E PLURIBUS UNIM” (“Out of many, one”). While the slogan is intended to refer to the U.S. as a nation federated out of various states, it also suggests the American ideal of a unified society tolerantly encompassing racial and ethnic diversity. Both possible meanings of “E PLURIBUS UNIM” are germane to the racial situation that existed in the South in 1961. Since the main impetus towards desegregation came from the U.S. Federal Government, the resistance of Southern white reactionaries threatened to create strife not just between the races, but also between Dixie and the rest of the nation. The first of these potential conflicts is suggested in “Everything that Rises . . .” when the black woman assaults Julian’s mother. The second is implied by the Lincoln cent as recalling the Civil War. In opposition to both possible evils, the motto “E PLURIBUS UNIM” indicates how the South should accept the will of the Federal authorities and help create a society where the races can coexist in harmony.

The motto “E PLURIBUS UNIM” also ties in with the theology of Teilhard de Chardin that influenced O’Connor when writing “Everything that Rises . . . .” Teilhard maintains in *The Phenomenon of Man* that an eschatological evolution is moving the human race from “diversity to ultimate unity.”\(^8\) Such a “convergence” will be completed at “Omega point” with the oneness of all men in Christ. In order for convergence to occur, individuals must surrender their “personal or racial egotism”\(^9\) and join with one another in love. Teilhard’s convergence of mankind from “diversity to ultimate unity” is of course brought to mind by the motto “E PLURIBUS UNIM.” The slogan would thus for O’Connor relate both to God’s plan for unifying all men and to U.S. history, suggesting the two are connected. More specifically, O’Connor evidently saw the progress of race relations in the South since the Civil War as part of the convergence of all humanity.

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towards Omega point. The segregationist views of Julian's mother and her
like accordingly constitute a sinful resistance to God's redemptive plan for
mankind. That opposition is caused in the case of Julian's mother by a
"personal...[and] racial egotism" arising from her pride of ancestry and
class status. Such "egotism" is suggested by the name Godhigh borne by
Julian's grandmother (p. 6). The name stands in neat ironic antithesis to
the motto "IN GOD WE TRUST" on the Lincoln cent and Jefferson nickel, a
slogan which implies a humble self-surrender to the divine plan moving
man towards convergence.

In "Everything that Rises...", the penny and the nickel thus relate
the racial situation in the South of 1961 to a larger cultural, historical and
spiritual context. On the one hand, the Lincoln cent suggests a century of
political, social and economic progress elevating blacks towards a final
Teihardian convergence with whites. On the other hand, the Jefferson
nickel most obviously intimates a conservative, aristocratic mentality
contributing to Southern white resistance to integration. The ultimate
defeat of such reaction is implied when Julian's mother cannot find a nickel
to give the little black boy. O'Connor is suggesting that the old South called
to mind by the five cent piece is gone forever. The "new penny" Julian's
mother does discover indicates the time has come for Southern whites to
accept social change, abandon their obsolete racial views, and relate to
Negroes in a radically different way. Instead, Julian's mother stubbornly
clings to a quasi-mythical past and refuses to accept the realities of the
present. This wrongheaded strategy is seen when she tries to use the coin
suggesting a new order in a way appropriate to the old. The violent rejection
of the "condescending" (p. 21) penny by the black woman is for Julian's
mother an appropriate, if ultimately tragic, initiation into verities she so
willfully denies.

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COITUS INTERRUPTRIS: SEXUAL SYMBOLISM
IN "THE SECRET LIFE OF WALTER MITTY"

Several critics have focused on the relationship between Walter
Mitty's daydreams and his marital situation. Leon Satterfield, noting the
parallel between Mrs. Mitty and the D.A., concludes that this third fantasy
"points up Mitty's latent hostility toward his wife." 1 Carl Linder finds
Walter Mitty's wife's role more symbolic, representing the "external and
confining pressures" upon him. 2 Ann Mann argues that, for an inveterate
fantasizer like Walter Mitty, Mrs. Mitty is the "ideal wife," for she fulfills
the paradoxical enabler-scapegoat role" in their marriage. 3 While all
