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JOHN KENNEDY TOOLE'S "THE NEON BIBLE" – THE PSEUDO-MEMOIRS OF A DEEP SOUTH MARGINAL

Jee-sus don't give a hoot what your past life was. He is willing to forgive and forget. He will welcome you with open arms. He wants you. Try living with Jee-sus and see how glorious your life can be.
(Bobbie Lee Taylor, *NB*: 70)

A good southerner doesn't kill anybody he doesn't know.
(Katherine Anne Porter)

The present essay explores J. K. Toole's *The Neon Bible* as a Southern Gothic *Bildungsroman* wherein the teenage protagonist enacts an Oedipal scenario the stark dichotomies of which pervade the narrative at almost every turn: tenderness vs. violence, tolerance vs. bigotry, fertility vs. barrenness, light vs. darkness *et al*. It becomes apparent that the safest way to decode the novel is to trace the twofold evolution of its anti-hero: through both uplifting and overbearing experiences, David translates from contemplation to action as the narrator follows his becoming on two planes – as victimized member of the community and as autonomous individual surrendering to a hysteria of violence.

Key words: Bible Belt, Southern Gothic, Oedipus complex, 'momism', queer performances

The Neon Bible tells the story of a young Southern boy's coming of age in a narrow-minded rural environment, not unlike many of Flannery O'Connor's settings in her celebrated short stories. A flexible first-person narrative captures the disintegration of an average middle-class family from a Mississippi provincial community through the mind's eyes of an oversensitive youth, whose entrapment inside the Bible Belt[1] – the then-and-now stronghold of American Protestant orthodoxy – conjures up the landmarks of the Southern literary canon: family life, religion, the sense of history and place, racial conflict and violence of all sorts.

David, the protagonist of the novella, echoes the inner struggle of his adolescent creator at the age of unanswered questions: the innocence of the former should not blind the reader to the fact that 16-year-old Toole attempts to assume polemic distance from Calvinist determinism and its skepticism toward man's ability to overcome his condition, to perfect himself/herself. Hence, David is 'David' for obviously symbolic reasons – just like the Old Testament King of Israel, the book's leading figure shall eventually confront the philistines of his day and prevail over the 20th century Goliath, an epitome of hypocrisy and intolerance. He shall have to do so at the cost of misery and isolation and finally win his freedom. Taken at face value, for all the naivety, genuine or intended, of its philosophical demonstration, or more properly remonstration, Toole's book is a parable of human freedom and David [is] a quasi-existentialist figure.

However, readers and critics alike usually succumb to the temptation of drawing parallels between *Neon Bible* and *Confederacy*, mostly to the detriment of the former. David is an unlikely hero whose tragic predicament is placed in direct connection with the author's own acute sense of displacement and marginality. Ignatius, on the other end, is a David gone sour, a caricature of degraded humanity, whose farcical existence, for all the laughter it stirs, is equally tragic.

Between the two novelistic landmarks of Toole's writerly career lies a territory of maturation – the author appears to fathom a twofold truth: while the incongruous carnivalesque comedy of Ignatius's absurd but intricate demeanour can be essentially tragic, the ontological road might as well be travelled in reverse to the primordial simplicity of David's implacable fatum.

[1] Bible Belt is an informal term for an area of the United States, especially Southern states, where socially conservative evangelical Protestantism accounts for a significant part of the local culture. The earliest known mention of the phrase "Bible Belt" was by American journalist and social commentator H. L. Mencken, in a 1924 article, published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*.

In his essay devoted to *Neon Bible*, "Toole's Proboscis: Some Effluvial Concerns in *The Neon Bible*", Robert Walter Rudnicki points out that Toole's first literary effort indeed asserts a transcendentally *tragic* view of humanity's place in the universe and is naturally followed by a process of learning and sophistication in terms of authorial progress:

> More specifically, *The Neon Bible*, thought to be Toole's only juvenile work …, can be productively read as a fledgling attempt to write the tragedy of a poor Mississippi boy; the more sophisticated Toole had learned from this first attempt that the comic view, particularly the satirical mode, was much more entertaining and complex – both technically and emotionally – in its treatment of human nature. Toole discovered that the tragic could be subsumed within the comic to achieve a more powerful and accurate representation of humanity. Thus, in Ignatius we find a perverse dialectic of Oedipal bonds and lucky dogs, childhood traumas and Dr. Nut, squalid surroundings and mythic scenecruisers. In the less celebrated work, however, we find evidence of only the darker elements of the nexus (1994: 221, *underlining mine*).

A gifted observer of humanity's foibles and endowed with an exceptionally keen sense of time and space, the young novelist "lures" his readers into a *Bildungsroman* scenario (David's coming of age and his inevitable, Blakean loss of innocence), composed in down-to-earth prose and displaying a clear penchant for symmetry. In Chapter One, we acquaint David past the age of three, playing with a toy train in the apparent security of his home, and we bid him goodbye in Chapter Ten as he rides away in a steam train, this time a 16-year-old murderer and a fugitive. It is not clear whether Toole's almost round-the-clock narrative representation of Dave's growing up is a sign of artistic immaturity or an early authorial ambition to elicit his readers' curiosity and/or compassion to such an extent that they simply cannot put down the book.

What can be discerned is that the approximate time span of twelve years that encompasses the protagonist's evolution coincides roughly with Toole's own childhood – a period between the inception of World War II and the mid-fifties, the calm before the storm caused by the civil rights movement and by America's renewed military involvement overseas. The teenage author must have had an innate sense of verisimilitude choosing to end his novella at an appropriate time and it is to " young Toole's credit that he ended his narrative when David reached his own age and did not try to write beyond his experience" (ibid.: 222). Nevertheless, one of the things that betray the tender age of the novelist, "likely motivated as much by Toole's experience with Hollywood melodramas as his own sense of youthful adventure" (ibid.: 222), is the Southern Gothic hysteria that invades the end of the piece as David's outburst of violence and the ensuing bloodshed are inconsistent with his rather amiable character and his kiss-the-rod passivity displayed hereinbefore.

A claustrophobic childhood and a horizonless adolescence are the ingredients that shape David's character while his worldly progress chronicles the "mental anaesthesia of a young mind forced to deal with too much too early" (Shone, 1990: 25). David grows up as a single child, living in a "little white house in town" (*NB*: 4) together with his mother (Sarah), father (Frank) and his eccentric Aunt Mae. The family live in the town from the valley until Frank loses his job at the factory and they have to relocate to a bleak house built on a clay hill that offers a broad perspective of the town.

While in town, David is a friendless child whose sole companion is Aunt Mae, a former nightclub singer of about sixty, whose flamboyant and provocative manner of dress offends the moral sense, real or pretended, of the townsladies. The whole town talks about her behind her back but to Aunt Mae any attention is better than no attention at all. She is a fictional crossbreed between Mae West and Jean Harlow and also Toole's personal response to the South's most celebrated faded belle, Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois.

In a more radical approach, "David's only hopes of connection with the outside world lie with Aunt Mae, an aged floozie who comes to stay, bringing life, sex and illicit knees-ups in the cinema" (ibid.). Even though she often teeters on the edge of unconscionable vulgarity, Aunt Mae displays a distinct vividness that prompts the narrative further. A surrogate mother for David in the first couple of chapters, she disrupts his ghost-like existence, acquainting the shy and reclusive boy with what he perceives as the complicated rituals of social life: attending family parties or strolling down Main

Street on Sundays. Simply but subtly, the young narrator manages to capture the Oedipal nature of this odd relationship:

> And when I sat on her lap, she told me stories about her days on the stage, and her boyfriends, and the presents she got. She was my only playmate, and we got along all the time. We'd go out walking, with her so funny with her buttocks all sucked in and her stomach stuck out like a pregnant Jean Harlow, and me always so small and sick-looking. No one who didn't know us would think we were in any way related (*NB*: 9).

Increasingly apprehensive of his son's relationship with Aunt Mae and embittered by repeated arguments with his wife – arguments fuelled by malicious town gossip about their eccentric lodger – Frank decides to pull David out the doll house of feminine influence(s) and introduce him gradually to the world of men. The move dramatically alters the family's lifestyle and restricts David's ability to interact socially with other children. The hypersensitive teenage narrator brings forward the child=victim equation and endows David with the dissociative sensitivity of the misfit.

Consequently, his first encounter with boys of his age ends up disastrously: during his visit to Bruce's – the son of one of Frank's co-workers – David is bullied by his six-year-old host, slapped in the face by his mother for something which was not his fault, victimized by the gratuitous violence of the other boys, and, the supreme humiliation, called a 'sissy' (*NB*: 12). This episode, narrated with both sickly tenderness and Southern Gothic rough detachment sounds almost like a Hemingway parody ("… They screamed and jumped off me. And I laid there and the sun was hot and there was dust all over me", ibid.), and plants the seeds of David's irreversible estrangement from his father and his resolute choice of the matriarchal matrix. Several commentators of the novel's editorial beginning were of opinion that 'Momism' is the head subject of the whole book, a topic in which "Toole finds an unexpected beauty" (Matthews: 1990: 66). Horrified by the arbitrary callousness of his peers, David looks for solace someplace else and "burrows deep inside his mother's ample bosom, loses himself in the sickly fragrance of his Aunt Mae's cheap perfume" (ibid.).

David's world is devoid of masculine role models as his father is as far as possible from a genuine father figure, while mobilization bereaves the small town of its men against the background of the US involvement in World War II. As if driven by some sort of relentless determinism of gender politics, all these factors converge and shape the protagonist's character unmistakably: "Nothing that follows can compete with the rapt intensity of that first love. The big boys, sniffing out his sissification[2], pummel him mercilessly. But the absence of the men during wartime creates a benign matriarchy in which he enjoys a frail happiness, easily shattered" (ibid.).

Even from an early point in the book it becomes clear for the reader that the narrator's heartbreaking precocity makes it impossible for him/her to draw a definite borderline between David's innocence and Toole's own (ibid.). A potentially healthy father-son relationship is literally nipped in the bud, the teenage narrator implies, not only because of the lack of tact and affection on the part of the former but also because the latter opts to rally with the feminine universe, almost against himself.

However, the psychoanalytical complexity of the situation seems to be lost on both; neither appears to comprehend the subtle negotiations of gender politics. If a five-year-old David, benefiting from his narrative in retrospect, reluctantly adds Aunt Mae to the embarrassment of his position, the reader knows for certain that Frank, a failure as a father, bluntly equates Aunt Mae with his son's 'sissification', unable to perceive her role as a formative influence upon his growing son:

> After that, I was never as friendly with Poppa as I was before, and he felt the same way about me. I didn't like it at all. Sometimes I wished we could be friends again, but there was something wrong neither of us could change. In a way I tried to blame it on Aunt Mae. At first I thought she had made him not talk to me. But I couldn't blame it on her for long, and no one could ever not trust her. (*NB*: 13)

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[2] We would like to believe that Peter Matthews also thought of Sisyphus, the mythological trademark figure for Existentialism, when he coined the term 'sissification'. This would further underline the precocious quality of the book and its protagonist's dramatic status.

David's father endorses a code of aggression that becomes more apparent to David as he matures. After Frank loses his job at the factory and starts to work part-time work at the gas station, his weekly wages can barely put food on the family's table. As such, his gesture of coming home one evening with no money, having spent all his earnings on seeds and farming tools appals his wife as a cruel extravagance. In a scene reminiscent of *Jack and the Beanstalk* (Malone, 1991: 416), she flies into a rage and begs him frantically to return his shoppings so that they will not starve. Frank responds with violence and the argument starts the family on "an irrevocable spiral downward" (Luft, 1991: 417):

> "All of it? All of the gas station money, Frank? No, no, you couldn't do that, not for seeds that are never going to grow. What are we going to eat this week? There's no more food in the house."… I saw Poppa's knee coming up, and I called out for Mother to get off the stairs. She was crying and didn't hear me, and Poppa's knee was already at her chin. She screamed and rolled backward down the stairs. I got to her just as she reached the floor. The blood was already flowing out the sides of her mouth. (*NB*: 29-30)

Frustrated by the unforgiving barrenness of his garden and feeling left out of the lucrative life of the community, Poppa fades away in violence, killed in action somewhere in Italy during World War Two. Time passes unbelievably quickly in the novel. The scraggy pine trees that Frank had tried to clear away to make room for his illusory vegetable garden grow back just as David moves from an innocent childhood into a tortured adolescence. David's perception of time integrates harmoniously into Toole's narrative discourse and so do the subtle details that the aspiring novelist intersperses in his prose. For example, Mrs. Watkins, David's spiteful teacher at County Elementary is cross-eyed, a grotesque suggestion of ambivalence (while she can effectively surveil her students, tricking them that she is looking in a different direction, her perception of the world is figuratively blighted and confused); the households whose men are gone to war hang flags outside, a token of both patriotism and admonition for the community's dodgers; the drying shirts waving on clotheslines signal safe returns from overseas, whereas the candles, fewer in the rich uptown part of the valley, bespeak death.

The fact that *The Neon Bible* is a *Bildungsroman* written by a teenager cannot be lost on the reader in that its stark dichotomies pervade the narrative at almost every turn: tenderness vs. violence, tolerance vs. bigotry, fertility vs. barrenness, light vs. darkness, and several others. Consequently, the safest and most lenient way to decode the novel is to trace the twofold evolution of its protagonist. Through both uplifting and overbearing experiences, David translates from contemplation to action as the narrator follows his becoming on two planes: as a member of the community and as an autonomous individual.

Engaging the former plane, one may notice that the detached description of David's school experiences allow Toole to expand his study of human character set against the background of the intolerant hypernormative rural environment. His school nemesis is Mrs. Watkins, "a fairy-tale witch of a schoolmarm" (Malone, 1991: 416), whose gratuitous malice inflicts numerous punishments upon the sensitive protagonist and strives to ingrain in him the idea that he is no good. Apparently, David suggests, Mrs. Watkins' disdain for Aunt Mae may have triggered a hostile attitude toward him, dismissing him as a sly and tricky smart-aleck kind, the perfect nephew for Aunt Mae (*NB*: 24). Returning the malice, he describes her in terms of blunt physicality, contrasting her repulsive features with the appealing ones of the feminine ensemble that cuddles him at home:

> I wondered why a woman had such a straight body, because both Mother and Aunt Mae were round, and you could lay against them and be comfortable. Mrs. Watkins was straight all the way, with two big bones sticking out near her neck. You never knew where her waist was. Some days her dress would make it look like it was at her hips, but then it would be up across her chest or else near to where a waist should be. She must have had a big navel, because thin dresses sank way in near her stomach. (*NB*: 26)

Mrs. Watkins' arbitrary malevolence is matched only by the fanatic religious intolerance and unscrupulous manipulative savvy of her husband, Mr. Watkins, the local preacher, whose portrait blends the features of a white supremacist, a Nazi cultural cleanser, and a philistine. However, the preacher is powerful and feared in the small community: his weekly sermons 'condemn sin', that is attach indelible labels to undesirable people, while his connections with the local press allow him to tamper with people's reputation and lives. The most compelling act of intolerance perpetrated by Mr. Watkins is the public burning of *Gone with the Wind*, reminiscent of the Inquisition's auto-da-fés: "All this made the people of the county respect him, and a group met in front of the library in black masks and went in and took *Gone with the Wind* off the shelf and burned on the sidewalk" (NB: 25). Since this is a man who does everything in his power to keep the coloured people from voting, burns Margaret Mitchell's novel because it is 'licentious', and brands all those who beg to disagree 'agents of the devil', respect in his case, as David implies, reads hatred, at best fear.

Another figure pertaining to the church that is fair game for Toole's prematurely lucid observation of the evils that hypocrisy engenders inside the community is Bobbie Lee Taylor, the Memphis revivalist, Toole's "promise of a Marjoe-like evangelist, "The Boy Who Has Seen the Light" (ibid.). Although Bobbie Lee lacks the evocative aura of the satirical false prophet of Sinclair Lewis's *Elmer Gantry*, in his revivalist performance Toole aptly captures the overall hysterical, holier-than-thou atmosphere of such gatherings. In tones that anticipate Toole's mastery of accents in *Confederacy of Dunces*, Bobbie Lee preaches against such sins as USO dances, and exposes himself to be a perfect target to what David McNeil calls 'reverse satire' in his analysis of the aforesaid novel:

> Today our nation is having a mortal struggle with the devil. In camps young girls are dancing with sailors and soldiers, and who knows what-all. At U.S.O. centers in our cities girls are giving themselves up to the oldest profession before our very eyes. The president's own wife takes a part in these activities. When they're dancing, do you think they're thinking of *Jee*-sus? You can bet your life they aren't. I tried that once. I was dancing with a girl once, and I said to her, 'Are you thinking of *Jee*-sus?' and she pushed me away. She don't realize the importance when she pushed me away. She made me realize that I was representing *Jee*-sus and that *Jee*-sus has no place on the dance floor. No, sir, that is the playground of the devil. (*NB*: 68)

The denizens in the audience, who piously attend Bobbie Lee's "great revival" (*NB*: 58), are the same people who react violently against the discharged men who return home from World War II with foreign-born brides, and even form an organisation of sorts that determines to preserve the ethnoreligious purity of the valley at all costs, lest damnation should descend upon the valley (*NB*: 95). Analysing the xenophobic outbursts of David fellow-citizens, Michael Hardin notices that "the valley is dominated by a group that intends to enforce homogeneity. Not only are the foreign-born and African Americans (138) hated and discriminated against, the elderly, whom David describes as being put on trains and sent to asylums (139), are as well. A pattern forms that is reminiscent of the Nazis, right down to the trains" (2007: 60).

While we're at it, it is worth mentioning the train metaphor as one of the book's most enduring achievements. The narrative displays the same penchant for symmetry as *Confederacy*, as David enters the stage playing with a toy-train and exits a fugitive boarding another train that will take him to freedom, away from the ruthlessness of the valley, away from his murderous finale.

Originally, an innocent David equates the toy-train with the serene bliss of childhood ("My train was a beautiful thing, though." - *NB*: 23). As he is gradually let into the deception, hypocrisy, and arbitrariness of adult life, mostly unwillingly, the protagonist calls upon trains in a different, sombre light, as in the dream he has after Aunt Mae's first boyfriend pinches his arm too hard: "I screamed at him in my dreams when I would see him riding my train over me as I was tied to the track" (*NB*: 17). The train metaphor accompanies David's maturation as a member, or better put an outcast, of the community, and marks his process of painful individuation as well: if the train metaphor grows gradually bleak, it is because it is indicative of the protagonist's own moral alteration. According to Robert Walter Rudnicki:

> … as David matures, he learns that the train – not his toy train but the real train – is the one that takes his father off to die in the war and the one that returns the lifeless bodies of other soldiers. This is the same train that the preacher uses to transport the elderly to the state asylum against their wishes, and the one that allows Aunt Mae finally to desert David and his mother. At the same time, however, it is the train that provides David with both a symbolic and literal escape from the (symbolic and literal) "valley." (2005: 232)

After Aunt Mae's definitive departure, one of the most painful trials that David is put to is to witness his mother's mental deterioration and death. As the story approaches resolution its style betrays O'Connoresque influence and compositional awkwardness: a prisoner of her deluded, disintegrating self, Mother begins to mistake David for her dead husband; near the end of the novel, David finds his mother lying in a pool of blood and she melodramatically dies in his arms. The final scene is dripping with Southern gothic and hysteria: just as he prepares to bury his mother in the grave he has dug in the backyard, Mr. Watkins, as denunciatory as ever about those he regards as 'fallen Christians', shows up at the door and demands that Mother be confined to a mental institution. Unwilling to negotiate, a hardened, bitter David gives the preacher no quarters and blows him off with his father's shotgun.

The accumulation of childhood and adolescence experiences – physical and verbal violence, emotional deprivation, psychological trauma, and public humiliation – escalates in the murder of Mr. Watkins, the corrupt preacher. Just as David lets go of his anguish and frustration with the deleterious social hypocrisy and ethnoreligious bigotry of his community by inflicting violence upon what he perceives as its representative, he revolts against a lifetime of personal victimisation taking the Biblical "an eye for an eye" very literally. Although violent and unnecessary, the novel's end posits an ironic reversal of perspectives: David reacts to Mr. Watkins with the same violent arbitrariness that he has been subjected to by him and Mrs. Watkins. Thus, defeated with his own sermonical arsenal, "in a sense, the preacher is destroyed by his own unwitting creation" (ibid: 231).

The narrative construction in *Neon Bible* is a process of allegorical advancement: from childhood into adulthood, from passive contemplation to violent action, from innocence to experience. Symbolically, the protagonist resists transformation, as shown in the prayer scene at the end of Chapter Two, when David favours the distant but pure starlight to the cold impersonal light of the neon Bible, a token of the artificiality, pretence, and hypocrisy incumbent upon adult life. He "cannot pray to the neon – a crude metaphor for everything unnatural and impure in the adult world, but when he looks to the purity of the stars in the sky he is cleansed, if only temporarily" (ibid: 235): "That seemed like a beautiful prayer, so I looked out the window and began, and my eye fell on the neon Bible below and I couldn't go on. Then I saw the stars in the heaven shining like the beautiful prayer, and I began again, and the prayer came out without even thinking, and I offered it up to the stars and the night sky" (*NB*: 38).

If on the plane of his evolution as a member/outcast of the community, David's trajectory is characterised by moral decline and is "literally a movement from being the childlike saint to becoming the murderous sinner" (ibid: 235), on the plane of his individuation as an adult male, his major problems seem to be his hypersensitivity and his difficulty in establishing relations with persons of the opposite sex, other than his mother and Aunt Mae. "Like Ignatius, writes Michiko Kakutani, he's unusually repressed about sex" (1991: 416).

Therefore, the other important thematic concern of the book that Toole goes to great lengths to put forward is the protagonist's horror of adult sexuality, similar to that of Ignatius in *Confederacy*. The closeted dimension of Toole's own life has led many critics to interpret David's and Ignatius's awkwardness with sexuality as representative of Toole's. The problem with such readings is that instead of advancing a possible non-heterosexual solution, critics tend to read the sexuality of Toole's protagonists as childish or immature. Several examples regarding Ignatius are telling:

William Bedford Clark describes Ignatius in terms of "perverse childishness" (1987: 275) concluding that "Ignatius's aversion to physical contact and resistance to the demands of natural sexuality have been two of the dominant symptoms of his infantilism" (ibid: 276).

Richard F. Patteson and Thomas Sauret forward the hypothesis that "sexual fears may be partly responsible for Ignatius' avoidance of love… Living with his mother at the age of thirty is a kind of escape – from adulthood, from sexuality, from rejection" (1983: 86).

The most outspoken opinion is expressed by Lloyd M. Daigrepont, who suggests the absurd condition of sterile sexuality: "Ignatius also exhibits a juvenile preoccupation with sex, masturbating and daydreaming about absurd encounters" (1982: 75). According to Robert Walter Rudnicki, it appears "the 'child/victim motif' is all too revealing of Toole's troubled state of mind during these years, especially when both texts are read against one another" (2005: 234).

In keeping with a parallel reading of Toole's two books, Michael Hardin forwards a novel working hypothesis and reads David's reticence to sexual matters as a proof of repressed homoerotic desire, and determines to analyse the queer dynamic of the book, to the understanding of which the "conservatism of the community is crucial" (2007: 59). His 2007 essay[3], "Between Queer Performances: John Kennedy Toole's *The Neon Bible* and *A Confederacy of Dunces*" states plainly that both David and Ignatius "find themselves compelled into performances of heterosexuality while being drawn to queer identities" (ibid: 58).

The first indication to sustain this claim is the introduction in the text of Mr. Farney, one of David's teachers in grade school, and his partner. Since the valley's hypernormative demeanour poses the threat of ostracism and expulsion to all those who violate its conservative constraints – ethnical, religious, social, and sexual – the unhindered presence, even toleration, of a character whose description (*NB*: 98-99) is so stereotypically gay is in itself a paradox: "The fact that only one different group is allowed to exist in the valley seems peculiar and explainable only if Toole is creating a privileged space for the relatively "out" gay male" (ibid: 60). Furthermore, Hardin suggests the townspeople, otherwise driven by racism, bigotry, xenophobia, couldn't possibly allow Mr. Farney to teach their children solely on the premise that he was the most intelligent and cultured man in town. He is tolerated only because "his queer performance… is domesticated and feminized" (ibid: 61). Hardin asks rhetorically: "What group of adolescent boys would forgo harassing a teacher about his homosexuality because of his intelligence?" (ibid: 60)

As such, proceeding with his stereotypical descriptions of everything pertaining to Mr. Farney, David comes to idealise his teacher as a representation of the "domestic dream" (ibid.). David informs the reader that Mr. Farney liked violets best of all flowers and entertained artistic preoccupations such as poetry, music, and fashion. Also, "He lived in a little house in town with another man who gave music lessons. It was painted blue and white and had pink curtains in the front windows" (*NB*: 100).

Hardin argues that "David's homoerotic desire also manifests itself in his sensual observations of men" (ibid: 62). Contrasting the detailed physicality of David's descriptions of Mr. Farney and revivalist Bobbie Lee, especially with regard to the features of their faces, with that of Jo Lynne's, David's ostensible love interest, he finds evidence of unconscious homoerotic desire. For example, Mr. Farney's "eyes were the clearest blue you ever saw and were big and wide" (*NB*: 99); Bobbie Lee's "were blue, but a kind of blue I never saw before" (*NB*: 67); whereas Jo Lynne's eyes are only mentioned in passing, without being attributed any "transcendent" (ibid. 62) quality. Jo Lynne's description (*NB*: 119-120) is indeed plain, but this does not necessarily bespeak rejection of heterosexuality. It could simply stand for the uncanny mixture of nervousness and impersonality that marks many incipient infatuations with teenagers. Overlooking the fact that David might simply be shy and reclusive, while his creator may have been experimenting with various fictional types, Hardin concludes in favour of his thesis:

[3] The essay's point of departure, as suggested by the author, is the hypothesis of Toole's own homosexuality, a contingency we did not endorse in this paper: "None of the critics mentions the possibility of the author's homosexuality. While I have my own thoughts about Toole's sexuality, the purpose in mentioning these critics' readings is to point out that they enforce a heteronormative performance of the text, one that we must abandon if we are to understand the queer performance within the novels. By abandoning heteronormative readings of these texts, and looking instead at how sexuality is performed within the novels, we will see a rather clear queer subtext" (2007: 59).

> The only conclusion that makes sense with the rest of the novel is that the protagonist is repeatedly fighting society's compulsory heterosexuality. David's fight against compulsory heterosexuality is the same as Farney's, as is David's dream of a safe domestic space… Since neither the domestic heterosexual dream nor the "out" domesticity of Farney is accessible, David must leave the valley, but while doing so, he removes the family and attacks the church. (ibid: 64-65)

Since gay males are traditionally represented as effeminate and non-violent, except for murders committed out of jealousy (David's is not the case), the bloodshed at the end goes completely against the grain with the reading of the novel as queer performance(s). David does idealise the domestic space indeed: all the more so after Aunt Mae's departure and Mother's death deprive him of any family. The distancing train that carries David away from the horrors of human malice and coercion sets the pattern for one of Toole's dearest themes – escape. As for the end of the novel, Beverly Jarrett favours apostasy over gratuitousness and claims that David's murder is Toole's precocious statement of spiritual independency: "Toole already believed that the church had failed him… religion is the undisguised villain" (1993: 435-436).

As Mark Childress put it in *Sweetness and Terror* (1990), the first exegetic effort dedicated to *Neon Bible*, "Perhaps this is a book only a writer could love" (338). If we read Toole's beginner's novel with the amount of understanding required by its author's youth, we can comprehend its formative character and we become filled with admiration at how fast Toole burnt the steps in becoming a professional writer of fiction.[4] The conclusion, if overbearing, is not disheartening: Toole learned from an early age about the redemptive quality of existential suffering and understood only too well that the human self, engendered by violent inner tensions, must remain elusive, even fragmented, if it wants to preserve its autonomy, especially the creative one, and avoid permeation by well-meaning but ignorant outsiders.

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[4] John Kennedy Toole at sixteen displayed a quality inherited from his illustrious Southern predecessors and inspired by his no less illustrious contemporaries – an exquisite sense of space and time. Flannery O'Connor's apophthegm fits his writing to perfection: "The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find the location." (1970: 59)

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