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Catholic Literary Theory: The Conditional Existentialism of Four Protagonists and their
Creators

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of Arts and Humanities
University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Jacob Patrick Pride
June 2017
Advisor: Clark Davis

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Title: Catholic Literary Theory: The Conditional Existentialism of Four Protagonists and their Creators

Advisor: Clark Davis

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Abstract

According to Catholic literary theory, the novelist, like the Divine Mystery to a certain extent, creates her characters freely and free with the possibility and probability that they may speak against their creator and even finally rebel. This dissertation reflects upon the relative infiniteness of four literary authors—Flannery O’Connor, Mary McCarthy, Walker Percy, and Cormac McCarthy. In the three novels and one imaginative memoir considered in particular, these authors create their existentialist protagonists, who in their turn reflect the conditional existentialism of their creators. This dissertation, thus, seeks to resurrect, with modern sensibilities, the pre-renaissance and renaissance commonplace that the poet is a creator, and to examine how this schema figures into the Catholic belief that man is created in the Divine Mystery’s image without a loss of human freedom. Celebrating this mystery of existence, Catholic literary theory suggests that the Catholic universe is for all at all times, and not only for those who identify themselves as Catholics. The value of this dissertation for the field of literary studies lies in that insofar as the poet and novelist has lost her identity as creating out of love because God, the Divine Mystery, created her out of love, then philosophy, history, theology, and literature, itself, are in mortal danger. This is the appeal that writers like O’Connor and Percy conscientiously make and writers like Mary McCarthy and Cormac McCarthy confirm despite themselves.

Acknowledgements

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Caitlin Elizabeth Pride, who married me four years ago and has helped me through both my master's and doctorate, including editing this dissertation. She has given me two handsome boys: William Robert, my coursework companion, and Charles Joseph, my dissertation buddy. Caitlin, you are the most beautiful woman in the world, and I am blessed to be your husband.

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My Love, the mountains,
The lonely wooded valleys,
The strange islands,
The rivers resounding,
The whistling of the wind
Love-abounding,

The peaceful night,
The time of dawn arising,
The hushed music,
The solitude sounding,
A supper that creates and recreates.

~St. John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle* (13-14); translation is my own.

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Chapter One: An Introduction to Catholic Literary Theory

“We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation.”

~St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (26)

Let us, then, begin with the authors Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy, who living from almost the beginning of the twentieth century to almost its end devoted themselves to awakening Catholic literary theory particularly in the modern American South. Establishing a Catholic literary presence in provincial pockets was not their end, neither in the sense of their true purpose nor their final dissolution. They believed that Catholic literary theory needed to be further developed in light of Catholic theology, so that works of fiction, especially novels by Catholic authors, could continue to be properly discussed in academic settings. O’Connor and Percy, as well as Mary McCarthy and Cormac McCarthy, all asked in so many words and in their own ways: “What if the Divine Mystery’s freedom to create does not exclude but rather enables our own freedom as creators? What if Catholic aestheticism finally enriches our understanding of modern literary creativity?” With regard to the art of fiction, in particular, O’Connor says, “If we intend to encourage fiction writers, we must convince those coming along that the Church

does not restrict their freedom to be artists but insures it” (MM 151). The Catholic Catechism expounds on this theme of co-creativity:

God is the sovereign master of his plan. But to carry it out he also makes use of his creatures’ co-operation. This use is not a sign of weakness, but rather a token of almighty God’s greatness and goodness. For God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of co-operating in the accomplishment of his plan. (306)¹

Insofar as human creativity and freedom derive from the divine, *per se*, Catholic literary theory must be a model for rather than an exception to literary theory, in general. In the final analysis, however, a theory of literature in Catholic or any other terms remains inadequate. In *Mystery and Manners*, O’Connor observes, “The virtues of art, like the virtues of faith, are such that they reach beyond the limitations of the intellect, beyond any mere theory a writer may entertain” (158). Catholic literary theory is neither co-extensive with the Catholic faith nor does it have the same divine weight and authority that the Catholic Church claims to possess. Catholic literary theory, nevertheless, is highly informed by Catholic beliefs, both those known by faith and by reason. As a theory, it naturally suggests that the Catholic universe is for all at all times, and not only for those who identify themselves as Catholics.

Certain definitions and parameters guide and temper the inherent universality of Catholic literary theory. The term “conditional existentialism” is used in counter-

¹ This dissertation frequently refers to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a veritable library of Catholic thought, to explain certain Catholic beliefs pertaining to our discussion. In the Apostolic Letter *Laetamur Magnopere* (L: “with great joy”), which introduces the Catechism, Pope John Paul II emphasizes, however, that the Catechism is a summary, rather than a lengthy examination, of the faith. The parenthetical documentation of all ecclesial documents cited in this dissertation refers to the paragraph rather than page number within those documents.

distinction to the atheistic existentialism of twentieth century writers, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. Conditional existentialism refers, rather, to the limited yet real freedom that Catholicism understands to exist within the human heart. Although the Divine Mystery, as the Source of Being and communal in nature, enjoys infinite and absolute freedom to love and to be loved within himself, the Catechism says that the Economic Trinity, i.e. the Divine Mystery as revealed to and known by the human intellect, is necessarily limited and incremental. The Catechism, however, says, “The ultimate end of the whole divine economy is the entry of God’s creatures into the perfect unity of the Blessed Trinity” (260). Conditional existentialism, then, is intended to indicate that there are real and eternal consequences to accepting, or conversely rejecting, our ontological situation as made in the Divine Mystery’s image and likeness, which in turn, Catholic literature and literary criticism depicts and explores.

Divine Mimesis

St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430 AD) firmly grounds the mimetic structure of Catholic literary theory in his literary autobiography *Confessions*. The modern propensity to examine the “dark side” of existence is explored through Augustine’s pear tree episode. *Confessions*, as a whole however, is the story of Augustine’s journey from darkness into light, from sin and sorrow to love and eternal joy. When Augustine was sixteen, he and some other “blackguards” steal pears for no other reason than the sweetness of the sin itself. Augustine admits that many sins are committed with good intentions in mind and that “there is an appeal to the eye in beautiful things” (29). For Augustine, however, sin ultimately grows out of a *mis*-prioritization of things. It is, in a

sense, a lack of perspective because the Divine Mystery that gives life and beauty to everything is paradoxically hidden rather than made manifest by the delight in the sin that is immediately enjoyed. Augustine describes this mysterious dynamic through the episode of the pears:

The pears that we stole were beautiful for they were created by Thee, Thou most Beautiful of all, Creator of all, Thou good God, my Sovereign and true Good. The pears were beautiful but it was not pears that my empty soul desired. For I had any number of better pears of my own, and plucked those only that I might steal. For once I gathered them I threw them away, tasting only my own sin and savouring that with delight; for if I took so much as a bite of any of those pears, it was the sin that sweetened it. (31)

Now according to Catholic literary theory, all literary protagonists as well as the authors who create them are positively or negatively partial reflections of the Divine Mystery who created them. As the protagonist of his story and speaking not so much to himself but directly to the Divine Mystery, Augustine describes this metaphysical and literary structure thus: “Even those who go from You are still perversely imitating You. But by the mere fact of their imitation, they declare that You are the creator of all that is, and that there is nowhere for them to go where You are not” (32).

Two of the authors I have chosen—Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy—were practicing Catholics, who strove to write the way they did in response to and in accordance with their Catholic faith. In contrast, Mary McCarthy embraced modernistic atheism at a young age in lieu of her Catholic faith. Cormac McCarthy, who is the only one of the quartet still alive, says that his Catholic upbringing does not influence him significantly one way or the other. All of these characters, both the makers and the made, positively or negatively imitate the Divine Mystery. Utilizing four existentialist protagonists of the four authors, I seek to examine to some extent how these human

authors are like the Divine Mystery. Each author and her corresponding protagonist exemplify particular aspects of the Divine Mystery's creative and redemptive power. Whether each author recognizes that his or her ability is God-given is for our purposes secondary, yet significant, and something that I also explore.

The value of my² thesis for the field of literary studies lay in that insofar as the poet and novelist has lost her identity as creating out of love because the Divine Mystery created her out of love, then philosophy, history, theology, and literature, itself—as Catholicism sees these mutually symbiotic disciplines—are all in mortal danger. This is the appeal that writers like O'Connor and Percy conscientiously make and writers like Mary McCarthy and Cormac McCarthy confirm despite themselves.

Contemporary literary theories are tacitly, at least, almost exclusively either agnostic or deistic/atheistic. The former view holds that the Divine Mystery may have created the universe, but we do not and cannot really know anything about primordial creation, so it is ultimately a non-question. The latter view, in its deistic form, rationally acknowledges the Divine Mystery's existence but rejects his involvement in our present reality through divine revelation; in its atheistic form, it is an explicit denial of the Divine Mystery's existence, or at least, a denouncement of any divine involvement, since the Divine Mystery—if he exists—must necessarily be our enemy. As the prominent atheistic philosopher and literary scholar Jean-Paul Sartre says with respect to man's freedom in *Literary and Philosophical Essays*: “Our freedom is limited only by the divine freedom”

² For the sake of maintaining formality and a critical stance, the use of the personal pronoun is generally avoided, but especially in the introduction and interchapters of this dissertation, it is used on occasion for the purpose of emphasis and clarification.

(196). In *What is Literature*, Sartre defies the Divine Mystery as the creator and, instead, proclaims, “The world is *my task*, that is, the essential and freely accepted function of my freedom is to make that unique and absolute object which is the universe come into being in an unconditional movement” (65). This modern atheistic view, of which Sartre is representative, holds that the Divine Mystery’s involvement in our lives is positively unnecessary, absolutely unwanted, and utterly unwarranted, since his freedom to create us in his image is in direct opposition to our freedom to create ourselves in our own.

This state of affairs concerning our understanding of the Divine Mystery and his works was not always the case. In fact, for most of history, *Anno Domini*, the knowledge of the Divine Mystery’s existence and beneficence was the rule, not the exception. In his book on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James says, “It takes a great deal of history to produce a little literature” (2). One might add that it takes a great deal of history, philosophy, theology, and especially literature to produce a little literary criticism. One of O’Connor’s favorite theologians, Romano Guardini, says in *The End of the Modern World*, “Medieval anthropology, in both principle and application, is superior to its modern counterpart” (33).³ Guardini admits to certain progress in the modern age, but contends that on the whole, humanity has regressed. According to Guardini, we have unfortunately wandered far from our heavenly home, as medieval society understood it.

Although this dissertation especially presents this pre-modern anthropology, of which Guardini speaks, for the reader’s consideration, it is not—or meant to be—a

³ Guardini continues, “In morality and moral attitude, medieval life had a firmer yet richer hold on reality than is possible for modern man; it also made possible a fuller perfecting of human nature” (33).

religious sermon. Contemporary critical analysis and research, generally speaking, have distinct goals from creative writing, including homiletic literature. As Nancy Jean Vyhmeister notes, “Research is not a sermon” (5). She says that while the goal of the sermon is to “reach the heart and change people’s lives,” research papers such as this dissertation seek to “inform and convince the mind” (5). This distinction is crucial, particularly in a dissertation such as this one, which is highly invested in religious belief and the study of God (Gr: θεολογία, *theologia*); moreover, the sermon’s goal of persuading the listener applies to a certain extent to creative writing, in general, and to the four novels we are examining in particular.

Whereas novels, such as *Wise Blood* and *Child of God*, embody a certain persuasive force, the goal of this research is to present a logical and coherent argument—to attempt to do, instead, what I am claiming that the authors and texts themselves do would be futile, and in a sense, redundant. With this critical distinction between the genre of the sermon and the genre of research, Vyhmeister sensibly adds, “Naturally, the conclusions we reach are somewhat modified by our personal opinions, but whoever reads the research report must be able to follow the logic and evidence to see how we reached our conclusions” (5). As O’Connor might say, even as we assiduously pursue the *mysteries* of faith and literature, we must strive never to lose our *manners*. I have enjoyed the process of uncovering, and in a sense recovering, the revelation of the divine in literary writing during this dissertation research. It seems that what I have found, paradoxically, is that there is so much more for me to learn, but that the search is worth every effort.

Literature and the Divine Mystery

With this critical framework in place, let us proceed to the task at hand. This dissertation seeks to resurrect, with modern sensibilities, the pre-renaissance and renaissance commonplace that the poet is a creator, and to examine how this schema figures into the Catholic belief that every human is created in the Divine Mystery's image without a loss of human freedom. I discuss literary, philosophical, and theological approaches to the notions of truth and freedom, and I use the idea of "character"—its etymology, morphology, and various historical and literary meanings—as a kind of motif tying my analysis together. I discuss both the authors—a kind of character sketch, if you will—and their works according to Catholic literary theory principles with an eye to how the works are essentially related as "Catholic literature," notwithstanding seeming disparity.

Although the dissertation can be read in its entirety, I have tried to give the individual chapters a coherence that would allow each to be read on its own. I have divided the chapters, not including this introduction and the short conclusion, as follows:

1. "Flannery O'Connor, Hazel Motes, and Other Characters:" O'Connor characterizes her own calling as a Catholic artist as a means to express the Divine Mystery's love, even if the world seems overwhelmingly—in O'Connorsque parlance—"mean." O'Connor's fiction artistically renders first the mystery of sin, both original and actual, in order to understand the gospel in its fullness according to Catholic belief. O'Connor suggests through Hazel Motes that the Divine Mystery has placed a particular calling on each of

us, and though we are free to reject it, this character invites us to become who we are meant to be without undermining but rather enhancing our freedom.

2. “The Hubris of Mary McCarthy in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.” The protagonist of Mary McCarthy’s memoir is herself, but she is also, in a sense, not herself. As the second-century Catholic philosopher and theologian St. Irenaeus of Lyons suggests, the Divine Mystery creates us in his image, yet we also create ourselves through our choices—either according to the Divine Mystery’s likeness or against it.⁴ Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is a story of this self-fashioning of both the author and her simultaneously factual and fictive protagonist.
3. “Walker Percy and Leisure in *The Moviegoer*.” Percy admits to being influenced by many authors, especially those, it seems, concerned with existentialist themes. We will examine how the work of St. Augustine and Fyodor Dostoevsky, in particular, helps create Percy’s protagonist, Binx Bolling. In doing so, we will also discuss how the notion of the Divine Mystery’s creation *ex nihilo* is utterly unique, although literary creation maintains important vestiges of this primal creation.
4. “Cormac McCarthy’s *Child of God* without God.” Of all four protagonists, McCarthy’s Lester Ballard seems to least resemble either his relatively infinite

⁴ In *On the Incarnation*, the Church Father St. Athanasius, formulates the Catholic belief thus: “By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his [fallen] nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt” (par. 30).

creator, i.e. McCarthy, or his absolutely infinite Creator. Our discussion of *Child of God* as a work of poetry will explore how human freedom remains viable even amidst overwhelming perversity. The serial killer and necrophile, Ballard, will help us investigate, and perhaps experience to some extent, how the existence of an omnipotent and omnibenevolent Divine Mystery remains probable, even when one of his children chooses a life of monstrosity.

The larger implications of this dissertation reach toward something beyond the notion that only writers who grew up Catholic, or have converted to Catholicism, or are interested in Catholic culture and practices, produce Catholic literature. As Thomas C. Foster, the author of the popular *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, observes: “Suffice it to say that every writer prior to sometime in the middle of the twentieth century was solidly instructed in religion” (47). Perhaps the significance of the claim that all literature is, in a sense, Catholic literature, as well as the reasons and evidence for it, is hard to see because it is so large and so contrary to the way our modern minds tend to think about literature. This inquiry into the *univocity* of good literature and Godly literature is a central theme of this thesis.

Moreover, Catholic literature has to do with the confluence of academic disciplines, the disjunction of which is a particularly modern phenomenon. The common modern view is that literature is exclusively *not* philosophy, history, or especially theology. As Thomas L. Jeffers observes, it was only at the beginning of the twentieth century that universities had “English” departments (Leavis 37). The classical liberal arts curriculum did not include “Literature” as a separate discipline. The *trivium* of grammar,

logic, and rhetoric made way for the *quadrivium* of arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy, which in turn, prepared the student for the crowning work of philosophy and theology. Catholic literary theory, insofar as it brings to the fore that which is common in the various academic disciplines, can be a means of uniting them, even as the very word *catholicas* (L: universal; involving all) connotes.

I am proposing in the dissertation that literature can, again, be seen as a kind of summation of it all—or more particularly, a synthesis of history, philosophy, and theology, and that these ancient traditions can be, again, illuminated by Catholic Christian revelation. Whereas Sartre proposes that existentialism is the synthesis of the consequences of living out atheism consistently, I am iterating the paradoxical Catholic belief that “we are what we do” and “we are responsible for our actions” (existentialist tenets) not in a vacuum but in the light of the Divine Mystery creating us in his divine likeness. I do not want to be, or be seen as, a troglodyte, or foolishly nostalgic—like another Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*. I am not arguing by any means that we ignore everything we have learned in the twentieth century and force our ways back to a medieval understanding of the human condition.⁵ Rather, I want to be clear that when I write philosophically, historically, or theologically, I simultaneously write literarily in the spirit of the pre-modern age and according to what it knew all-too well, namely, that all literature is essentially philosophical, historical, and theological.

⁵ Walker Percy, who was instrumental in getting *A Confederacy of Dunces* published, says in the book’s preface that Ignatius Reilly is “without progenitor in any literature I know of—slob extraordinary, a mad Oliver Hardy, a fat Don Quixote, a perverse Thomas Aquinas rolled into one—who is in violent revolt against the modern age” (viii).

One especially critical danger with maintaining a thesis that emphasizes how the Divine Mystery makes us in his image is to misconstrue this reality into meaning its opposite—that we create the Divine Mystery in *our* image. At the end of the Walker Percy section (40), I quote Percy as making the rather creative distinction between the Divine Mystery’s act of creation and a merely human act of creation. Percy says that the Divine Mystery creates *ex nihilo*—pure and simple—whereas, we create out of the “nothing” of ourselves. The fundamental distinction between the Divine Mystery’s absolutely unique creative action and our own, which is a function of the Divine Mystery’s free gift of creativity to us, needs to be maintained from the outset, throughout, and to the end. This empowering humility before the Divine Mystery is not a new concept to the field of literary studies, but it is not in our modern age rightfully acknowledged—even as a plausible possibility. The atheist Romantic poet Percy Shelley proclaims in “A Defence of Poetry” that poets are “the unacknowledged legislators of the world,” (717) but more and more, it seems, the Divine Mystery has become the unacknowledged poet of the universe.

The relationship between the Divine Mystery’s freedom and our own suggests the connection between theory, especially with its speculative qualities, and theology, which also speculates yet remains rooted in revealed truth. Theory and theology are together, in a sense, both human and divine. Despite the somewhat illusory etymological connection between the words *theory* and *theology*, there has been and remains a long tradition of fruitfully linking the meanings of the two terms, which are by no means mutually exclusive. In *Teaching Christianity*, written early in the fifth century, Augustine spells

out a kind of meta-theory via Catholic literary theory. Augustine says that all things are—or rather, ought to be—also symbols signifying other things but not in an infinite regress, which is impossible. According to Augustine, every “thing” is, in a sense, also a sign. He says, “This, indeed, is the difference between temporal and eternal things, that something temporal is loved more before it is possessed, but loses its appeal when it comes along; this is because it cannot satisfy the soul, whose true and certain abode is eternity” (125).

Even eternal things, according to Augustine, are subservient to and meant to point toward the Divine Mystery: “That is why *there abide* [Paul] says, *faith, hope, charity; but the greatest of these is charity* (1 Cor. 13:8), because when anyone attains to the things of eternity, while the first two fade away, charity will abide, more vigorous and certain than ever” (125). The Divine Mystery, Love, is the only “thing” that is not also a sign; rather, he alone is the source of his own existence, and in him all things finally rest. The Divine Mystery necessarily points to himself because *there is nothing from which he derives*, but this verbal formulation is in a way misleading because the very syntax of the sentence seems to undermine the Divine Mystery as real—to say that the Divine Mystery derives from nothing seems to indicate that Nothing is his creator or at least somehow preceded him. For Augustine, however, the inadequacy of the formulation “Nothing is God” or “God is Nothing” points to the weakness of human words rather than any deficiency in the Incarnate Word.

Augustine notes that once we speak, our words fade into nothingness, but the Divine Mystery’s Word remains. Augustine’s distinction between theology and mere theory in *Teaching Christianity* suggests an abundantly practical result of contemplation,

namely loving the Divine Mystery permits one to properly love himself and his neighbor: “So if you ought not to love yourself for your own sake, but for the sake of the one your love is most rightly directed as its end, other people must not take offense if you also love them for God’s sake and not their own” (115). Augustine’s words may strike our modern ears as callous, as O’Connor’s stories often did to her contemporaries, but both Augustine’s and O’Connor’s theorizing is rooted in the deeply Catholic theology that each human being is made in the Divine Mystery’s image. Catholic literary theory seeks to unite human creativity to its final *telos*, the artist to the creator, and theory to theology. According to Catholic literary theory, the novelist, like the Divine Mystery to a certain extent, creates her characters freely and free with the possibility and probability that they may speak against their creator and even finally rebel.

The Communion of Philosophy, Theology, and Literature

By this title, I do not mean to suggest that literature is precisely the same discipline as philosophy or theology, or that by performing one there is no need for engaging the others. With regard to literature, O’Connor was fond of quoting St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 AD) as saying that art is concerned, in particular, “with that which is made” (cf. MM 65, 82, 171). She says, “The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art” (171). O’Connor is not thereby saying, however, that literature is not philosophical or theological but rather the paradox that “art transcends its limitations only by staying within them” (171). What distinguishes literature from philosophy and theology is not its object, which in all three cases is the truth, but rather the mysterious manner in which it conveys the truth. Accordingly, an atheistic theologian would be

oxymoronic, and an atheistic philosopher would necessarily write against the presence of the Divine Mystery, but an atheistic poet or novelist cannot help but reveal the Divine Mystery, inasmuch as the poet is a maker who makes what is made precisely insofar as he is made in that divine image. The literary author's authority is, thus, by itself rendered inadequate.

A Catholic novel does not have to be written by a Catholic novelist, and consequently, the Joycean characterization of the literary artist as a "priest of words" is apropos. The necessary ambiguity of literature, however, causes it to be more difficult to pin down its "Catholicity" than finding this quality in philosophical works. This dynamic is due, in part, to the fact that, generally speaking, philosophy and theology seek to clarify, whereas, literature is more expansive. As the philosopher and novelist, Iris Murdoch, says, "Literature entertains, it does many things, and philosophy does one thing" (4). Literature's multifaceted discourse is, however, grounded in philosophy and theology. In "How to Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic," Percy says, in particular: "The intervention of God in history through the Incarnation bestows a weight and value to the individual human narrative which is like money in the bank to the novelist" (SSL 178). This "money in the bank," however, seems to become something that the Christian artist *owes* instead of *owns* in a society that rejects the Divine Mystery as real.

Sartre agrees, in a sense, with Percy's notion of a kind of Catholic literary advantage. In *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, Sartre says, "[Catholic] writers, by the very nature of their belief, have the kind of mentality best suited to the writing of novels"

(8). Percy and Sartre, thus, share a common literary view concerning the concept of the Incarnation as a commanding metaphor of art and literature; nevertheless, both O'Connor and Percy understood that although the admission of the Divine Mystery as being a powerful idea, at least, might seem an appealing compromise for believer and nonbeliever alike, it is ultimately an inadequate solution for either one, insofar as it fails to acknowledge that the Divine Mystery is more than just an idea. Rather than pointing to the Divine Mystery's existence, the idea of God as merely an idea tends to obfuscate even the possibility of such a one as the Divine Mystery existing. If he were only an idea—even the greatest idea ever conceived—then it would be better for him to be forgotten completely, since as existentialism observes, existence is greater than possibility. From the existentialist perspective, whether theistic or atheistic, such an idea would only get in the way of self-realization insofar as the 'self' thinking the idea necessarily could not also be the realization of the idea. In other words, the creature cannot also be, of himself, the Creator—something that has been known in both disciplines of philosophy and theology since their inception.

The beneficent relationship between philosophy and theology is well established in Western Christianity. In *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, Ross Labrie points to the medieval theologian and doctor of the Church, St. Thomas Aquinas, who famously said that philosophy is the handmaiden of theology, and as Labrie observes, “emphasized that knowledge began with the senses” (5). Due to Catholicism's characteristically thomistic approach in theology for centuries, Labrie argues that Catholic writers tend to object to most contemporary literary theory. Noting the attempts

of certain philosophers to salvage Christian art, at least, from the depths and raise it into the realm of the intellect, Labrie comes to the conclusion: “It has to be conceded, however, that the Catholic Church’s traditional assessment of the artist has been marginal at best, far behind the value that, certainly in the last four hundred years, has been given to theological doctrine, metaphysics, and ethics” (7). Labrie’s view can be seen as springing from the modern tendency to disassociate art from philosophy and theology. The criticism, however, is valid, insofar as many—even and especially Catholics—have forgotten the essential role that art plays in life and evangelization.

John Paul II’s “Letter to Artists” resists, to some extent, Labrie’s characterization of the Church as having forgotten the artist. In the letter, John Paul II, who was a playwright and actor before his ordination to the priesthood, encourages artists and says he intends “to follow the path of the fruitful dialogue between the Church and artists which has gone on unbroken through two thousand years of history, and which still, at the threshold of the Third Millennium, offers rich promise for the future” (1). At the heart of this dialogue is the view that art is not extraneous, but rather essential, to the life of philosophy and theology; or more importantly, that philosophers, theologians, and artists need each other.

Labrie observes that the Catholic thomistic philosopher, Jacques Maritain, had “a considerable influence on Flannery O’Connor, Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Robert Lowell, and Thomas Merton” and that Maritain “asserted that both the artist and the theologian were involved in the pursuit of wisdom, the success of which pursuit would, after all, affect the value of the art object” (16). Maritain’s insight echoes that of another

thomist, Josef Pieper. The epigraph of the third section of Pieper's *Leisure: the Basis of Culture*, entitled "The Philosophical Act" is a quote from Aquinas: "The reason why the philosopher can be compared to the poet is that both are concerned with wonder" (62). One might add, by inverting the order of the two pursuits, that the reason why the poet can be compared to the philosopher is that both are also concerned with truth. Aquinas would have approved of this two-fold commonality held between poetry and philosophy, that is to say, wonder and truth. The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* by Pope St. John Paul II begins with these words: "The splendour of truth shines forth in all the works of the Creator and, in a special way, in man, created in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26). Truth enlightens man's intelligence and shapes his freedom, leading him to know and love the Lord" (1). John Paul II, thus, insists that poetry, philosophy, and theology are united in and through the fact of human and divine freedom. Seen in this light, the Catholic Church has not been derelict in its duty as the guardian of the arts. Why, then, does there seem to be such a dearth in Catholic art and fiction? Perhaps the answer can be found from within the human heart.

O'Connor models this melding of faith and reason, nature and grace in her art. She says, "Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived," but that "without Grace we use [creation] wrong most of the time" (HB 144). The word "fiction" is variously considered to have its Latin roots in the words *fictilis* 'made of clay, earthen;' *fictor* 'molder, sculptor;' and *fictum* 'a deception, falsehood; fiction.' Considering its double relationship to what is made/sculpted and the idea of deception, it is fascinating to compare its etymology to that of "fact," which derives from the Latin noun *factus*, 'an

event, deed, achievement,’ and the past participle of *facere* ‘to make or do.’ Considering, further, that in the 1500s, “fact” referred primarily to *evil* deeds done, the idea of fiction being associated with deception and wickedness, in particular, becomes even more captivating. Both fact and fiction are, in a sense, functions of our fallen nature. As we reflect on the etymology of the words, we can see that the story of the fall includes all the essential elements: Adam and Eve are deceived into thinking that what they make apart from the Divine Mystery is greater than what he has made them to be. The story is thus as much about fiction as it is about fact. The Divine Mystery, as the Divine Poet, molded man out of clay, but Satan deceived man, and man committed the *evil deed* of disobedience.

The common historical dimension of philosophy, theology, and literature is crucial for our understanding of their communion. All of Catholic theology, which in a sense crowns the work of both poetry and philosophy, finds its roots in the *factus* of the Incarnation—*Verbum caro factum est* ‘And the Word became flesh’ (John 1:14).⁶ In *Verbum Domini* (L: Word of the Lord), Pope Benedict XVI says, “The historical fact is a constitutive dimension of the Christian faith. The history of salvation is not mythology, but a true history, and it should thus be studied with the methods of serious historical research” (50). The historical dimension of Catholicism is crucial for the work of Catholic literary theory, since without it, the theory might be compared to any number of non-existent and non-rational hypothetical theories. In *You Can Understand the Bible*, the

⁶ All Scripture references, unless otherwise noted, are taken from *The Didiche Bible*, which uses the *Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition* translation of Scripture and provides extensive commentaries from the Catholic Catechism.

Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft points out that “sacred history” reflects the central mystery of the Incarnation: “Sacred history means history from a double point of view, the divine as well as the human. It has two natures. Like Jesus, the Bible is the Word of God in the words of man. Its human nature is not suppressed but fulfilled by its divine nature” (40). Accordingly, both the philosophical and the historical in Catholic theology are equally important in Catholic literary theory.

Poetry as Playful Participation in the Sublime

Poetic and fictional making is really about an experience of the sublime that is so real that what is made also comes into existence. In “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor asserts, “All novelists are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality” (41). This “ultimate reaches of reality,” in a way, harmonizes with the romantic notion of the sublime. In John Keats’s letter to John Taylor, Keats offers a few axioms about poetry, the last of which is that “if poetry comes not as naturally as the leaves to a tree it had better not come at all” (494). This axiom is not an indictment against people who are not poets trying to be poetic. Instead, Keats is encouraging each of us to attempt poetry, even if we are continually failing in the attempt. In both poetry and theology, we must expand our notions of what the ultimate reaches of reality include. It is precisely in the failure of the attempt that we become closer to the goal of understanding the sublime, since the sublime cannot be fully comprehended—only encountered.

When philosophy and theology become too cerebral and thereby disintegrated, literature has often been a balm of rehabilitation and healing, but by the same token, when literature becomes divorced from its philosophical and theological moorings, its allure becomes fatal. Modern skepticism is, in part, resultant of the intellect's perception of overstepping its bounds and claiming an objectivity that it cannot by itself possess. In *God the Artist*, Jan Gorak notes, "The *deus artifex topos* is one that modern criticism has largely overlooked" (5). The Romanticism of the nineteenth century both clung to and deviated from the *deus artifex topos*, however, and there remains vestiges of it in modernism. The Confessional poetry of O'Connor's teacher at the University of Iowa, Robert Lowell, and that of John Berryman, for instance, both rely on the idea of the Divine Mystery but rebel against his existence and artistry. In *The Freedom of the Poet*, Berryman develops a theory that seeks to replace the Divine Mystery as the artist by re-conceptualizing the poet, not as man made in the Divine Mystery's image but as gods made in Man's image. In any event, Berryman's theory about the transferability of the poet's life and the poet's work as exemplified by Walt Whitman is rather distinct from the notion of "poet as creator," espoused by T. S. Eliot and countless before him.

Since, according to Berryman, Whitman *records* his own "emotional and personal nature" rather than creating a new persona *ex nihilo* in his poetry, there remains a personal connection between the art and the artist. Berryman finds Eliot's theory of the impersonality of the artist to be ineffective and even amusing, since Eliot's playing God as "poet-creator" seems to Berryman to be laughably arrogant (230). Berryman says that Whitman, on the other hand, maintains a special modesty with respect to his work even

as his *personality* remains more egotistical than Eliot's. Berryman says, "Whitman looks less pretentious in the recording—the mere recording—poet not as maker but as spiritual historian" (230). Ultimately, Berryman absolves Whitman's poetry of the hubris of playing god altogether: "The poet as creator plays no part in Whitman's scheme at all" (230). Considering Berryman's profound understanding of and love for Whitman and Whitman's poetry, it is not surprising that Berryman himself would assume the role of "spiritual historian" in the recording of his own work.

As appealing as Berryman's model of the poet as *merely* a "spiritual historian" might be, to the Catholic mind, it is neither truly "spiritual" nor "historical." Catholic literary theory unites the models of the poet as maker and as spiritual historian without contradiction. It can and does draw upon the work of Whitman and Berryman through a *eucatastrophe* of their model. Whereas artists like Berryman seek to subjugate the Divine Mystery's freedom to man's, Catholic literary theory sees man's freedom as springing from the Divine Mystery's creative love. O'Connor's art, as representative of Catholic art, is simultaneously romantic and realistic because it reflects the romanticism and realism of her Catholic faith. O'Connor's notion of art and the power it evokes in many ways is indebted to the "realist" literary critic Henry James. James's birth was almost twenty years after the romantic poet Keats's death and James's death was about ten years before O'Connor's birth, but his aesthetic theory, in a sense, connects the poetry of Keats to the fiction of O'Connor to a certain extent. O'Connor's "mystery and manners" and Keats's "negative capability" share the attributes of being, at the same time, intrinsically elusive and continuously immanent. One might say that O'Connor is concerned with the

same reality as Keats's famous line from "Ode on a Grecian Urn,"—to show how "beauty is truth, truth beauty."

O'Connor's notion of the art of fiction in many ways directly descends from Henry James's notion of the same. In "The Art of Fiction," Henry James proposes, "Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints" (855). In line with James's understanding of art, Catholic literary theory draws from various viewpoints without being illogically syncretic and maintains that the artist has a special vocation for living freedom in truth. In "The Regional Writer," O'Connor speaks about regional identity and says that a cultural identity is "not to be found on the surface; it is not accessible to the poll-taker; it is not something that can become a cliché," and she says, "In its entirety, it is known only to God, but of those who look for it, none gets so close as the artist" (58). Negative capability is a description of the artist's engagement with beauty and the mystery of identity. It remains in modernity the fascination with the Sublime, but without the guidance of philosophy and theology, it ends in nihilism. O'Connor says that the myth of the "lonely writer" is "a hangover probably from the romantic period and the idea of the artist as Sufferer and Rebel" (53). O'Connor, however, does not thereby undermine the genius of a romantic poet, such as Keats or Shelley; rather, she draws out the important distinction that the "loneliness" of great writers is something of their own making, even as the making itself reflects the poet's divine character and calling.

The word poet comes from the Greek *poetes*, meaning "maker, author, poet." In *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*, Isabel Rivers says that,

according to the renaissance poet, Giovanni Boccaccio, theology is the poetry of God, and further, all true poetry is theology. (152) Accordingly, for Boccaccio, the poet is also a theologian. Even more astonishing than the poet's theologizing, however, is the way in which the poet, per se, is god-like. Rivers describes the awesome place of the poet as maker: "Just as God, the creator of the world, is a maker, a poet, so the poet, the creator of his own world, is a god" (152). This renaissance formula concerning the power of the poet derives from the words of St. Peter in the New Testament: "[Christ's] divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" and thus we may "become partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 3-4). Rivers points out, further, that the idea of the Divine Mystery as a maker is not only Christian but also Platonic, and via Plotinus and others, the idea of the Divine Mystery as an artist eventually became a "Renaissance commonplace" (152).

The idea of the Divine Mystery revealing and, in a sense, replicating himself in the soul of the poet is ancient—even among non-Christians. In "On the Sublime," the anonymous author Longinus (first century AD) playfully quotes himself as having said: "Sublimity is the echo of a great soul" (79). He describes elevated or "sublime" language as having five principal sources: 1) the power of forming great conceptions, 2) vehement and inspired passions, 3) fitting formation of figures (of thought and of expression), 4) noble diction, and 5) dignified and elevated composition (79). According to Catholic literary theory, these marks of the sublime are characteristics of the Divine Mystery. Even Longinus clearly references Genesis, when he says, "Similarly the legislator of the Jews, no ordinary man, having formed and expressed a worthy conception of the might of

the Godhead, writes at the very beginning of his laws, ‘God said,’—what? ‘Let there be light, and there was light; let there be land, and there was land’” (80). This “echo” is noteworthy, since most of Longinus’s many references are to gentile writers, such as Plato, Homer, and Euripides.

Longinus, in his own way, sublimely expresses the conditional existentialism proposed in this dissertation. He makes the connection between sublimity and humility, between reaching for the stars and remaining humble and restrained: “Nay, it is perhaps better for men like ourselves to be ruled than to be free, since our appetites, if let loose without restraint upon our neighbors like beasts from a cage, would set the world on fire with deeds of evil” (98). This description of the human being’s want of restraint brilliantly reflects, or rather anticipates, that of Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667). Satan’s famous mantra is “better to reign in hell than serve in heaven” (Book I, Line 263). Despite the superficial appeal of Satan’s proposition, the poet of antiquity understood that it is far worse to reside in hell than in heaven—in whatever capacity.

Over a millennium after Longinus, Boccaccio gives another permutation on the literary trope of the godlike poet. In “Genealogy of Gentile Gods,” the fourteenth century Italian poet brings together the poetic with the philosophical, as Longinus does, but adds the theological. The sublime enters into and binds together historical, philosophical, and theological matters in a way that causes each discipline to transcend itself and become something more than what it is by itself. According to Boccaccio, poetry has the unique quality of encompassing all that exists, insofar as all that exists can be encompassed. In this vein, Boccaccio declares: “If my opponents care to consider it, they will perceive the

forms, habits, discourse, and actions of all animate things, the courses of the heavens and the stars [...] will seem actually present in the tiny letters of the written poem” (132). Let us pause here to test Boccaccio’s claim—not scientifically, mind you, but poetically.

Following Boccaccio’s playful participation in the Sublime, “An Apology for Poetry” by Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) is often cited as a text that epitomizes English Renaissance poetics. In “Apology,” Sidney argues, “The poet only bringeth his own stuff, and doth not learn a conceit out of matter, but maketh matter for a conceit” (153). What Sidney is proposing is no small thing. The vocation of the poet is strictly speaking divine. Sidney asserts that the work of the poet is, in its way, greater than that of the philosopher and the historian. According to Sidney, the “peerless poet” performs both the work of the historian, who deals with “the particular truth of things,” and the work of the philosopher, who sets down “with thorny argument the bare rule.” Sydney says that the poet transforms the bare rule and “giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done; so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example” (148). Thus, the art of poetry provides an understanding of the sublime as much as such an understanding is possible.

According to the renaissance commonplace, man is the poet, who like the Divine Mystery can make fact from fiction and fiction from fact. Returning to Milton’s brilliant imagery, man’s knowledge of good and evil can be used to serve, and thereby exemplify, the Divine Poet, or else to serve, and thereby exemplify, the Infernal Poet, Satan, who seeks to subjugate humanity created to transcend him through the Incarnation of their common Creator. Thus, the poetry of man becomes, in itself, a seeking after the sublime,

yet man may relinquish his power to create by giving it over to Satan's powerful seduction. The comparison between poetry and lovemaking of Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux (1636-1711) comes to mind. In "The Art of Poetry," the seventeenth century poet Despreaux continues Boccaccio's "strain" at the beginning of Canto I: "It is in vain that a rash author attempts the Parnassian heights of the art of verse" (242). Despreaux says of the poet, "If the star he was born under has not made him a poet, he will remain imprisoned always in the narrowness of his powers" (242). This romantic ideal to be a poet is, again, not meant to discourage anyone from poetic making under the false pretense that "I am no poet." On the contrary, Despreaux reminds everyone that he must create—in some fashion or another—lest he relinquish all that he is as a human made in the image of the Divine Mystery. This catholicity of the creative imagination is consonant with Catholic literary theory, the object of which is likewise the Sublime.

The *Via Pulchritudinis*

C.S. Lewis's masterpiece, *The Screwtape Letters*, can be seen as a modern rendering of this divine, or inversely, demonic impulse found in Milton, Boccaccio, and Despreaux. The demon Screwtape tries to explain the Divine Mystery's "appalling" desire to unite himself to human beings to Screwtape's nephew Wormwood: "One must face the fact that all the talk about his love for men, and his service being perfect freedom, is not (as one would gladly believe) mere propaganda, but an appalling truth" (298). Screwtape finds this "perfect freedom" to be an "appalling truth" because his ruined angelic nature has utterly rejected the Divine Mystery's invitation to love, which alone creates. Satan's joy is the most perverse form of *schadenfreude*. Man's loss (L:

damnum) is Screwtape and Wormwood's gain. Screwtape continues, "[The Divine Mystery] really does want to fill the universe with a lot of loathsome replicas of himself—creatures whose life, on its miniature scale, will be qualitatively like his own, not because he has absorbed them but because their will freely conform to His" (38). Screwtape further explains that Satan, "Our Father Below," *also* wants all things to be at one with him, but unlike the Divine Mystery, Satan wants simultaneously to annihilate all things—subsume them into his being so that they cease to exist and he, alone, exists. Screwtape's explanation of Satan is consistent with Catholic tradition, which relates that Satan was particularly outraged at the Incarnation, that the Divine Mystery became a human being instead of an angel. Sartre's description of the Divine Mystery as un-artistic applies nicely to Satan, as Screwtape renders him. Screwtape concludes his sermon, explaining that the Divine Mystery, "Our Enemy," desires "a world full of beings united to him but still distinct" (39). Screwtape thus expresses the central paradox of this dissertation that freedom can and does exist through conforming to the Divine Mystery's will.

For O'Connor, also, existential and eternal fulfillment requires that we see an essential connection between our pre-death lives and our post-death lives, seen through the Divine Mystery's love for the essence of our being. O'Connor expresses the paradox in terms of what she calls being "Christ-haunted." She says, "The Southerner is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God" (MM 45). According to O'Connor the *via pulchritudinis* (L: "the way of beauty") was the means to become Christ-haunted. O'Connor was greatly influenced by the work of Henry James,

whom she greatly respected as an artist. She, nevertheless, says, “There is no literary orthodoxy that can be prescribed as settled for the fiction writer, not even that of Henry James, who balanced the elements of traditional realism and romanticism so admirably within each of his novels” (49). She pays this perhaps dubious compliment to James: “I know of no writer who was more of a conscientious artist” (65). In “The Art of Fiction,” James asserts, “The analogy between the art of the painter and the art of the novelist is, so far as I am able to see, complete” (856). He adds that the inspiration, the process (allowing for the different quality of the vehicle), and the success of the painter and the writer are all the same. (856) O’Connor, who was also a painter in her own right—a cartoonist—is often quoted from her essay “The Fiction Writer and His Country” to depict her style of writing:

When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use the more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large startling figures. (34)

O’Connor understands that the reader brings his own views to the table when encountering her stories. O’Connor is writing to an audience who, as she says, “think God is dead” (HB 92). She is, however, neither anxious about converting non-believers nor desirous of merely shocking her audience. O’Connor’s grotesque fiction proposes the belief in both the natural and the supernatural, which Christian realism entails. The stories, however, are not empirical proofs of Christianity; rather, they create a space for believing in the Divine Mystery, particularly the Trinitarian, Incarnational *Logos* and *Lover* of O’Connor’s Catholicism.

O'Connor admits to failing in the realm of negative capability. She points to herself and her fellow Catholics: "We Catholics are very given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with a renewed sense of mystery" (MM 184). O'Connor alludes to St. Gregory's description of Sacred Doctrine: "St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery" (184). Implicit in her reference is the analogy between sacred and secular texts. She says, "Faith tends to heal if we realize that faith is a 'walking in darkness' and not a theological solution to mystery" (184). Thus, we must end, in a sense, where we began, but only because this sense of mystery and indeterminacy is what opens us up to the power of the sublime. O'Connor says, "The poet is traditionally a blind man, but the Christian poet, and storyteller as well, is like the blind man whom Christ touched, who looked then and saw as if they were trees, but walking" (184). The poetic inspiration, even for the Christian novelist, is always a new beginning rather than a final end.

Some Notes on this Dissertational Structure

As this dissertation focuses on four novels by four Catholic authors, I was interested to find other works that had similar structures. There are many works about the two most visibly Catholic authors, such as Farrell O'Gorman's *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction*. Even when one such book is more specifically about one of the two authors, O'Connor or Percy, the other author generally remains pervasive. O'Connor and Percy, due to their Southernness and orthodox Catholic aesthetic perspectives, are frequently and fittingly paired together. Several important American Catholic literary monographs also concern

four Catholic writers with two of the authors being O'Connor and Percy. Paul Elie's *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* weaves the lives and work of O'Connor, Percy, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day into a tale of depth and wonder. Referring to the four photographs on the first page, Elie says in the Prologue, "Ordinary people on the face of it—but for many of us these photographs are icons, ideals in black and white" (ix). Elie connects the four writers through the dynamism of their Catholic faith and adds, "the pattern of pilgrimage is also a pattern of reading and writing" (x). The four Catholic artists in Elie's work are, indeed, shining lights of careful reading and writing.

A second example of a monologue concerning four Catholic writers is Ralph Wood's *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists*. Like Elie, Wood includes O'Connor and Percy as part of his literary quartet. The second two authors whom Wood includes are atheistic yet also in some sense religious: John Updike and Peter De Vries. In the study's preface, Wood describes his first encounter with the work of Flannery O'Connor, when his Catholic professor, Dr. Paul Wells Barrus, had him read *A Good Man is Hard to Find*. Wood says, "I knew that I had been struck with revolutionary force by something at once hilariously funny, literarily excellent, and ecumenically Christian" (xi). Wood comically adds, "That the work of this Baptist Southerner [Wood] is published by a Catholic university press [Notre Dame] brings the story full circle" (xi). Wood's effort toward Christian ecumenism in this work is beautiful and admirable.

When I began my research, I was aware that such quartets abound in literary criticism, but I did not realize how often O'Connor and Percy were paired together along

with two other writers. I have already mentioned Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton as well as John Updike and Peter De Vries as secondary pairings. In *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*, Gary M. Ciuba's quartet of authors is composed of O'Connor, Percy, Cormac McCarthy, and Katherine Anne Porter. Ciuba's book, then, deals with three of my four authors. Although Ciuba focuses on O'Connor's *The Violent Bear It Away* and Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome*, his chosen novel, *Child of God* by Cormac McCarthy, is the same as the one I had chosen. I have not seen, however, any book about a literary quartet that presents all four of the authors that I have chosen.

Mary McCarthy's novel, moreover, is unique among the four novels in two important respects:

1. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is, as a memoir, a work of creative non-fiction; nevertheless, it maintains real fictitious elements, and I have chosen to consider it here as a novel as much as the other three novels due to the work of the author's intense imagination to create the story;
2. Unlike the other three novels, it is not identified as of the Southern Gothic genre, yet much of "Southern Gothic" literature might be better described in another way, as I will discuss.

With regard to the first distinction, McCarthy does not deny the fictional elements of her story. Introducing *Memories*, she says, "The conversations, as given, are mostly fictional." She goes on, however, to describe her renamed characters as "real," further clarifying that "they are not composite portraits" (4). Part of the reason I have chosen this highly autobiographical novel is to help explore the intermingling of fact and fiction and

my overall thesis concerning the Divine Mystery as artist, and the human artist as participating in the Divine Mystery's creative powers in both an artistic and moral sense. I use this novel's second distinction to illustrate that Catholic literary theory does not pertain only to Southern Gothic fiction, although the American South does tend to embrace a more medieval anthropology than her Northern literary counterparts. Although there are many points by which Southern literature especially illuminates Catholic literature, as O'Connor often notes in her letters and essays, the novels need not be "Southern Gothic" for our purposes. We are dealing specifically with the Catholic understanding of art and creation together with various modern existentialist themes; furthermore, we discuss some of how *Memories* might have more in common with the European Gothic novel than this dissertation's three Southern Gothic novels.

Finally, I have implemented Mary McCarthy's idea of interchapters, which she uses in *Memories*. This format provides several advantages. First, it shortens my introduction, since much of what I discuss in the interchapters would most likely otherwise be in the introduction. The overarching themes and goals of the dissertation, thereby, are clearer and more concise from the beginning. Second, the interchapters allow for important, yet secondary, information pertaining to the dissertation's thesis to be more integrated into and throughout the dissertation. For instance, the interchapter on Russian Literature comes immediately before the section on *The Moviegoer*, where I discuss Bolling as a new Underground Man. At the same time, the topics of the interchapters may not always so evidently connect to the discussion of my four showcase novels, but the resultant equivocality indicates to a point the necessary ambiguity inherent in the very

idea of Catholic literature. Thus, the use of interchapters better elucidates the “big picture” of the dissertation, which does not exclusively apply to the four novels. This dissertation employs the wit and wisdom of O’Connor and many of her Catholic friends, as our Virgil, so to speak, in order to help navigate the various levels of literary Catholicism in the novels we have chosen.

Chapter Two: Flannery O'Connor, Hazel Motes, and Other Characters

“But approaching the subject from the standpoint of the writer, I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted. The Southerner, who isn’t convinced of it, is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God.”

~Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (45)

Many O'Connor scholars, such as the author of *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, Ralph C. Wood, emphasize the first sentence of the above quote. The second sentence seems to speak more directly to the central idea of the present study, namely, that writers co-operate in divine creation through creating characters who are free to choose, much like themselves—but why would O'Connor say that the unconvinced Southerner would be “very much afraid” of this glorious reality of being made in the divine image? O'Connor is using an Old Testament turn of phrase: “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight” (Prov. 9:10). O'Connor understands both sides of being made in the Divine Mystery’s image. The word “blessed” has its roots in two Old English words—*blis* and *blod*. The first word means “bliss” and the second “blood” (cf. Deut. 30). Both the “blissful” but especially the “bloody” aspects of the ontological distinction of being made, as human beings, in the Divine Mystery’s image and likeness permeate her writing.

O'Connor's emphasis on this "negative side" of the good news in her stories follows the pattern of divine pedagogy in the Old and New Testaments of Scripture. Jesus, as the fulfillment of Scripture, does not only say, "Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you" (Matt. 25:34); he also says, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire" (Matt. 25:41). As a conscientious Catholic writing to an audience who think "God is dead," O'Connor vividly depicts the Divine Mystery's eternal blessing as a double-edged sword—life to those who embrace it, death to those who despise it—but this ontological situation is ultimately encompassed by and shot through with love. She believes on both accounts that it is worth it to worship the Divine Mystery, to seek out his plans, and to follow them. She says, "I think the more you write, the less inclined you will be to rely on theories like determinism. Mystery isn't something that is gradually evaporating. It grows along with knowledge" (HB 489). Whereas atheistic existentialism presents the false binary that either we create ourselves in opposition to the divine will or the divine will enslaves us, O'Connor's Catholic conditional existentialism enjoys the reality that everything the Divine Mystery has created is good, and by properly ordering ourselves according to his divine purpose, we create ourselves in and for freedom.

O'Connor uses the words "not convinced" rather than "not persuaded" in her description of the Christ-haunted South. To be convinced *of* Christ and Christianity is not the same thing as being persuaded *to* love Christ and live one's faith. Being convinced of something does not necessarily translate to living it out. St. Paul sums it up well when he writes, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the

very thing I hate” (Rom. 7:15). O’Connor suggests that if the Southerner, who is not convinced of his being made in the divine image, is afraid, how much more ought the one, who *is* convinced but not afraid, be afraid! Thus, Christ says, “The Son of man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born” (Matt. 26:24) and St. Paul admonishes, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). One might easily dismiss death, judgment, heaven and hell as the opiate of the people if it were merely presented as axioms and epigrams, but the genius of O’Connor lies more in her ability to harness the persuasive power of literature to convey these realities. O’Connor, however, does not wantonly indulge in fear mongering. Unlike Asa Hawks and Hazel Motes, two of her characters in *Wise Blood* who violently try to sell, i.e. “hawk,” something of their own making, O’Connor desires to share what she has received, namely, the truth, with anyone who might listen.

O’Connor’s Literary Catholicism

Even as a child, O’Connor had a deep sense of the mystery and mysteries of her Catholic faith. Mary Flannery O’Connor was born on March 25th, 1925, the Feast of the Annunciation,⁷ and she died at age thirty-nine on August 3rd, 1964, the Vigil of the Feast of the patron saint of Catholic priests, St. John Vianney. Both of these Catholic feast days

⁷ Other than being the Feast of the Annunciation, which celebrates when Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, March 25th is also remembered as the very day of Christ’s crucifixion according to medieval chronology. It was probably Dante Alighieri’s birthday as well as the day Frodo destroyed the “One Ring” in J.R.R Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. Since the following essay is cited in the next chapter of this dissertation, we might also note that March 25th 1811 was when Percy Shelley was expelled from the University of Oxford for writing “The Necessity of Atheism”—a very important date for history and literature.

fortuitously illuminate how O'Connor's Catholicism and her art mutually enhanced one another. O'Connor's birth and death together emphasize the Marian and Petrine dimensions of her Catholic faith—the mystery and the visible sign of her artistic ability. As to whether O'Connor's fiction primarily functions as art or as a sophisticated form of Catholic argument, I believe that O'Connor would have given the very Catholic and consummately artistic answer: "Both, and." And I would agree with her, but we do not have to rely on speculation. As an artist, O'Connor states, "The novelist always has to create a world and a believable one," and as a Catholic artist, she says, "In this sense, art reveals, and the theologian has learned he can't ignore it" (MM 158).

Unlike her Catholicism, O'Connor's artistry and critical acumen was not evident until young adulthood. In a letter to Betty Hester,⁸ O'Connor confesses that she "didn't really start to read until I went to Graduate school" (HB 98). Only then, she says, she began to both read and write extensively. She read "the Catholic novelists, Mauriac, Bernanos, Bloy, Greene, Waugh," and, she adds, "the best Southern writers like Faulkner and the Tates, K. A. Porter, Eudora Welty and Peter Taylor," as well as "the Russians, not Tolstoy so much but Dostoevsky, Turgenev, Chekhov and Gogol" (99). During her high school years, by her own admission, O'Connor read "Slop with a capital S," but she enjoyed *The Humorous Tales of Edgar Allen Poe* (98). It seems doubtful that many people, at the time, would have foreseen her abilities as an artist of such stature as she is now known.

⁸ In *Habit of Being*, Sally Fitzgerald refers to her anonymously as "A."

O'Connor did, however, have a bit of precocity and a brush with fame when she was only five. She begins her essay, "The King of the Birds," with these humorous words: "When I was five, I had an experience that marked me for life. Pathé News sent a photographer from New York to Savannah to take a picture of a chicken of mine" (*MM* 3).⁹ That the spreading of the news of her backward-walking chicken would have made an indelible mark on her at such a young age adumbrates the humble genius of O'Connor's art and her Catholicism. O'Connor's love of birds remained with her throughout her life. At Andalusia farm, peacocks roamed freely, and the peacock, whose Sanskrit name means "killer of snakes," remains a fitting emblem of O'Connor's legacy. According to Catholic tradition, there is a prophecy known as the *protoevangelium*, or "first gospel" in Genesis, the Divine Mystery promises to punish Satan, who in the form of a serpent tempts Adam and Eve to sin. The Divine Mystery says: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gen. 3:15). The Catholic Church understands "the woman" to refer allegorically to Mary, the *Theotokos* (Gr. "God-bearer"), and "her seed" as Christ. For O'Connor, seemingly insignificant events in her characters' lives often are secretly charged with the grandeur of God. O'Connor's tales are, like Poe's, extraordinary tales of humor and horror, but at the same time, they are of a rather different sort.¹⁰ In a word, her stories are about the humor and horror of her characters

⁹ The actual video of "Little Mary O'Connor" and her chicken can be seen at www.openculture.com/2012/06/author_flannery_oconnor_captured_on_film_at_age_5

all-too-often *not* knowing who they are, where they came from, and where they are going. The recognition of the tragicomic human condition she illuminates, however, can and is meant to be the beginning of renewal and regeneration.

O'Connor is intensely aware of modern ambivalence toward the metaphysical; nevertheless, she clearly stakes a claim through her stories on the side of Catholic teaching. The Feast of the Annunciation begins and characterizes the central Mystery of Christianity, as it does, in a sense, the life and art of Mary Flannery O'Connor. This mystery conveys that Mary, the mother of Jesus, said "yes" to the bizarre announcement that she would conceive and bear the Son of the Divine Mystery in her womb. O'Connor received her mission to spread the good news of Christ's love through artistic creativity, and like her namesake, she felt that she must either embrace that reality or reject it *en toto*. O'Connor states in her letter to Betty Hester: "I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call 'A Good Man' brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism" (HB 90). O'Connor acknowledges that Christian revelation, in a sense, surpasses realism—that it is supernatural—but not in order to divorce faith from reality. O'Connor, rather, maintains that Christian revelation contains the fullness of truth veiled in mystery. Since, as John Paul II points out, *sacramentum* means the same as mystery (Love 208), we ought to read

¹⁰ In "Edgar Allen Poe's Marian Consecration," the literary scholar, Steve Mirarchi, explores how the horror in Poe's fiction is perhaps more closely aligned with the same kind of horror O'Connor's fiction confronts than generally thought. Mirarchi argues, "Poe uses Catholic eschatology, the study of the four last things; Mariology, teachings on the Virgin Mary; and liturgy, the rite of the Catholic Mass and its extended prayers, to affirm the awesome and awful responsibility of human freedom in the face of the Word made flesh" (187).

“sacrament” whenever O’Connor often refers to mystery. The mystery of O’Connor’s fiction often appears horrific to our modern sensibilities. Like words themselves, the horror of it can be discussed in two ways—in terms of a physical horror or in terms of a metaphysical horror—but for O’Connor, these two realms interpenetrate each other.

As an artist, O’Connor was both profoundly intense and intensely light. She loved the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas and was enthralled with her Catholic Faith. She did not, however, philosophize or theologize, *per se*. She wrote good stories. Through a consistent and persistent ambiance of ambiguity, O’Connor conveys philosophical and theological truth—as she sees it—so that others might share in her vision and life. She says to John Lynch, “I write the way I do because and only because I am a Catholic” (HB 114). What often sets O’Connor apart from other Catholic writers is her keen observance and appreciation of the fact that characters, who seem to be outside the realm of—and even especially opposed to—love and grace can ultimately display such attributes most poignantly. She says in a letter to Fr. J. H. McCown that she has “read almost everything that [the practicing Catholic writers] Bloy, Bernanos, and Mauriac have written,” yet she goes on to admit, “at some point reading them reaches the place of diminishing returns and you get more benefit reading someone like Hemingway, where there is apparently a hunger for a Catholic completeness in life, or Joyce who can’t get rid of it no matter what he does” (HB 130). For O’Connor, art is the truth beautifully rendered, but often the proclamation of the truth of our abysmal slavery to various vanities and lurid addictions—in theological terms, to sin and Satan—is the most effective catalyst for beginning the process of salvation. According to O’Connor, to “beautify” our present

condition *without* the Divine Mystery is a lie that ends in wretched sentimentality; however, sometimes the artists who have rejected their faith through their art are even more compelling, in a sense, with respect to the universal need to be in communion with the Divine Mystery than those who have retained both their relationship with the Divine Mystery and art. O'Connor is not thereby praising atheistic art, *per se*; rather, she is worshipping the Divine Mystery, whom she believes is the originator of all art, just as he is the creator of all artists.

O'Connor's Catholic character is part and parcel of the charisma of her stories. Her Catholic artistic freedom underlines rather than undermines the existential freedom of her characters. In contrast to O'Connor's own view of her work, the fictional novel about O'Connor by Ann Napolitano, *A Good Hard Look*, portrays O'Connor's Catholicism as, if anything, incidental to O'Connor's life and fiction. Napolitano's suggestion that O'Connor was only apparently religious would remarkably impoverish the dynamism of O'Connor's art. In one scene, for instance, Regina¹¹, O'Connor's mother, has to drag O'Connor to her Sunday obligation. The narrator informs the reader that her fictional Flannery "figured she had heard every possible sermon a hundred times by now" and that she "used the time to perform her own worship" (66). The narrator opines that O'Connor, instead of praying with the other parishioners, scorned them. It seems that Napolitano imagines that O'Connor's participation in the rites of the Catholic Church could only have been to provide fodder for her stories. In O'Connor's last letter to Hester, however, the real O'Connor challenges this brand of worship: "Sarah Ruth [in

¹¹ Incidentally, *Regina* is Latin for Queen, as in *Regina Coeli* (L. Queen of Heaven), an ancient Catholic name for Mary.

‘Parker’s Back’] was the heretic—the notion that you can worship in pure spirit” (HB 594). Despite Napolitano’s best intentions, she can exalt neither O’Connor’s character nor characters by turning a blind eye toward the reality of O’Connor’s Catholic convictions.

The narrator in *A Good Hard Look* belies, in a sense, O’Connor’s understanding of the Divine Mystery’s omnipresence and the significance of the Catholic sacraments. Attempting to channel O’Connor, the narrator relates, “[O’Connor] could have said, I believe that God is present everywhere—in every tree, person, and pebble—whereas you [Regina] and the other ladies on this tour believe that God tends to spend his time in churches” (167). There were, no doubt, certain tensions between Flannery and her mother, but not on this point. Moreover, Flannery’s shared belief with her mother in the efficacy and particularity of the sacraments does not weaken but ratifies her faith in the Divine Mystery’s omnipresence. O’Connor believed that the Divine Mystery worked “in churches” in a special way through the sacraments. She believed that although the Divine Mystery is not bound by the sacraments, people are. O’Connor relates a now famous story to Betty Hester about an encounter with the fallen-away Catholic and “Big Intellectual,” Mary McCarthy. According to O’Connor, McCarthy expressed to her fellow academic interlocutors that when she was young, she had thought of the Holy Spirit “as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one” (HB 125). O’Connor writes, “I then said, in a very shaky voice, ‘Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it’” (125). To suggest that O’Connor was somehow pantheistic or anti-religious, as Napolitano seems to do, simply does not do justice to O’Connor’s faith or artistry.

O'Connor unequivocally confesses her belief in Christ, the Church, and the sacraments, and she does so with a healthy sense of awe. In *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, Ralph Wood sums up his book: "[O'Connor] lived, as we have seen, with extraordinary Christian devotion, both as writer and believer" (218). Wood goes on to clarify what O'Connor's Christian devotion entailed:

She regarded both her writing and her believing as intrinsic to her vocation, which she understood to mean two noncontradictory things: the general summons to cast everything aside and to follow Jesus Christ, as well as the particular call to work out one's salvation amid the often fearful circumstances of one's own life—in her case, through the discipline of her art. (218)

The traditional Catholic parlance for this "double vocation" is 1) the "universal call to holiness" and 2) "particular vocation," both of which are always connected in one way or another to the sacraments—Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony. At the same time, O'Connor is well aware of the limitations of speech and art, and her stories are—as all stories are—bound by a principle of perspectives.

O'Connor was an artist who strove to artistically represent the world as she experienced it. Writing to Hester in a letter dated July 20, 1955, O'Connor again divulges how she sees the interconnectedness between her art and her faith: "I write the way I do because (not though) I am Catholic . . . However, I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness" (HB 90). Using Carl Jung's terms, O'Connor describes this modern consciousness as "unhistorical, solitary, and guilty" (90). O'Connor's characterization of herself relates a kind of necessary ambivalence, since the message of Catholicism paradoxically both opposes and redeems the modern consciousness. The work of grace directs O'Connor's characters toward righteousness

and communion; nevertheless, the characters often remain mired in their isolation and guilt. Grace is, therefore, always dynamic rather than stagnant, and this dynamism forms the heart of the story's drama.

The Character of O'Connor's Characters

O'Connor's handling of character is linguistically and realistically multi-dimensional—it resides in the realm of mystery. For the literary artist, the primary sense of “character” refers to those populating the writer's world. In a good work of art, the characters maintain, or at least struggle to maintain, their own agency. They act according to their own lights, even if those lights radically oppose the will of their creator. Sometimes, certain characters may, by the action of grace, freely choose to *see* the truth and perhaps even to live in it. A good character literarily speaking, however, does not necessarily have a good character, and in O'Connor's fiction, it seems, more often than not, any given character does not. The Oxford English Dictionary defines character in a “literal” and a “figurative” sense. In the former, it is “a distinctive mark impressed, engraved, or otherwise made on a surface;” however, in “figurative contexts,” character refers to “the indelible quality which baptism, confirmation, and holy orders imprint on the soul.” The Catholic Church has always been a very physical religion, and the character that one receives through the sacraments is not figurative in the sense of being untrue or merely symbolic but rather concealed, veiled in mystery. The sacraments seal and reveal, and simultaneously, in a sense, *conceal* the human freedom to create like the Divine Mystery, who creates and recreates us. Thus, the baptized, confirmed, the married, and/or ordained can choose to desecrate his or her sacramental character. The

sacramental character of O'Connor's fiction is the spirit that moves and invigorates her characters, and conversely, without that character, they spiritually die.

These various definitions of character inform and express O'Connor's life and art. Her Catholicism does not limit her artistic creativity but rather embodies it. Like a magnifying glass that gathers the light and heat of the sun, her Catholicism focuses the rays of ambient truth into a powerful point that ignites flames that produce their own heat and light. The characters of her creation share in her own spontaneous freedom and the mystery of existence. Flannery O'Connor often depicts in her short stories the primary philosophical and theological question: "Who am I?" O'Connor understood that writing stories is not so much about leading people to moral action; rather, it is about shining forth beauty that engenders a sense of mystery and awe for both the author and the reader to enjoy and fear together. O'Connor writes to Betty Hester that she is "not very severe criticizing other people's manuscripts" because, she says, "I don't concern myself overly with meaning, but the meaning in a story can't be paraphrased and if it's there it's there, almost more as a physical than an intellectual fact" (183). She also says, "I remember my own early stories—if anybody had told me actually how bad they were, I wouldn't have written any more" (183). O'Connor knew that art is not the *most* important thing, although it is tremendously important. She is deeply concerned with this sense of spiritual priority, which might be expressed in any number of religious formulas—e.g., the Orthodox *proto Theos* (Gr. "God first") or the Jesuitical *ad majorem Dei gloriam* (L. "For the greater glory of God"). For O'Connor, identity and grace are bound up into and by one another, and to brush aside the truth in order to live more conveniently simply will

not do. O'Connor is deeply concerned with both the truth and the ambiguity that the good story always allows.

O'Connor's Catholic worldview prompts her to ask, "Whence evil?" The Divine Mystery, who is the source of goodness, does not create evil, and yet evil exists—how? O'Connor deals with two types of horror in her stories—the horror of evil suffered and the horror of evil committed, but it is the latter horror that is preeminent. In "The River," O'Connor presents the reader with a vivid depiction of the paradox of love, in which a kind of *kenosis*, or emptying, of oneself has to occur in order to make way for spiritual regeneration. According to the Catholic Church, sacrament is, in a way, synonymous with mystery, and the mystical aspect of Baptism is how Christ brings life from death—an echo of his own resurrection from the dead. The four-year old boy, Harry Ashfield, tells Mrs. Connin that his name is Bevel because the name of the preacher at the river is Bevel. When Mrs. Connin asks Harry whether he has been baptized, Harry only grins. Mrs. Connin assumes that Harry's name is actually Bevel and that he has not been baptized (CS 167).

The horror of Harry's drowning metaphorically suggests the horror of our own complacency in the face of the Divine Mystery's loving-kindness: "[Harry] plunged under once and this time, the waiting current caught him like a gentle hand and pulled swiftly forward and down" (174). Again, the Christian sacrament of Baptism is rooted in the Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, but quite often in life only the silent horror of death is perceived. The narrator continues, "For an instant he was overcome with surprise: then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting

somewhere, all his fury and fear left him” (174). O’Connor is not writing in judgment of Harry, Mrs. Connin, or Harry’s parents. On the contrary, as she explains to Hester: “What the Catholic fiction writer must realize is that those who question [faith] are not insane at all, they are not utterly foolish and irrelevant, they are for the most part acting according to their lights” (HB 138). O’Connor writes this principle of ontological freedom into her fiction, and thus, her characters remain free, yet they often enslave themselves through selfishness and narrow-mindedness. According to O’Connor, grace is reality, and grace engages the characters the same way that it engages every human being—it affects him whether he is aware or ignorant of its presence. This mystery of personal freedom amidst the allure of sin is what O’Connor sought to realize in the stories she wrote.

The root sin of pride is the ultimately insufficient foundation, in an ontological sense, of many of her characters’ actions. Literarily, however, the manifestation of their pride is deeply satisfying. In “The Artificial Nigger,” the revelation of the *mysterium iniquitatum* (L. mystery of evil) unfolds between a grandfather, Mr. Head, and his grandson, Nelson. Mr. Head wants to teach Nelson a lesson and thinks his trip with Nelson to Atlanta as being just the ticket: “It was to be a lesson that the boy would never forget” (CS 251). Nelson needs to learn a lesson in humility, but the narrator gives a telling description of Nelson and his grandfather’s physical similarities that suggest that the grandfather and grandson are more alike—even on an essential level—than they might be comfortable with: “They looked enough alike to be brothers and brothers not too far apart in age, for Mr. Head had a youthful expression by daylight, while the boy’s look was ancient, as if he knew everything already and would be pleased to forget it”

(251). The grandfather and the grandson literarily represent modern man, believer and unbeliever alike, who is possessed with a double-edged naivety and a double-edged ancient iniquity.

The description of the two characters' simultaneous similarity and dissimilarity is free indirect discourse from the grandfather's perspective. There is a note of dramatic irony, since the grandfather seems unaware of how he shares in the neophyte's self-righteous attitude toward life. The grandfather's vanity is more lamentable, since he should know better. As the grandfather and grandson become more and more lost in the city, reality becomes paradoxically more and more clear to them: "The sun shed a dull dry light on the narrow street; everything looked like exactly what it was" (264). Mr. Head's betrayal of the boy—"This is not my boy. I never seen him before" (265)—betrays, as it reveals, the essential similarity between the grandfather and the grandson. The revelation of their mutual vanity invites the reader to reflect upon her own denial in the face of reality. The grandfather and grandson recognize that they are both flawed, and Nelson turns toward Mr. Head, imploringly, "to explain once and for all the mystery of existence" (269). Neither Mr. Head nor modern intellectualism can.

The pride that her characters entertain is often that of presumption rather than despair. In "A Circle in the Fire," O'Connor describes the blindness of thinking that age necessarily entails wisdom. Mrs. Cope indulges in a kind of facile optimism that she is in control of her life simply because she has learned to cope with her experiences in life thus far. Mrs. Cope's naivety is exposed through her trying to reason with and thus control the boys who squat on her land. She is anxious about a fire burning her woods but foolishly

thinks she can control these boys, who turn out to be as vivacious and unpredictable as her imaginary fire. Mrs. Cope thinks her morbid servant, Mrs. Pritchard, is hopelessly unrealistic, but it is Mrs. Pritchard who ends up predicting the future better through her so-called pessimism. Mrs. Cope divines her own optimism to be realism. Underneath, however, a profound insecurity plagues Mrs. Cope. Speaking to her daughter, Mrs. Cope says, “When are you going to grow up? What’s going to become of you? I look at you and I want to cry! Sometimes you look like you might belong to Mrs. Pritchard!” (CS 190). Her comparison of the child to Mrs. Pritchard reveals the contempt that Mrs. Cope has toward Mrs. Pritchard, whom she sees as silly and superstitious. The child responds, “Leave me be. Just leave me be. I ain’t you” (191). Mrs. Cope mistakenly believes that growing up necessarily means growing up just as Mrs. Cope prefers.

Mrs. Cope imagines both the boys and her daughter almost as if they are little demons, but it is Mrs. Cope who is possessed, so to speak, with a spirit of divination. She refuses to grow up and cope with the reality that she is not in control. Mrs. Cope’s name speaks the dramatic irony of her situation. In her own eyes, Mrs. Cope sees all things clearly. She is a pragmatist. She is mature. But she fails to see precisely what even the superstitious Mrs. Pritchard sensed was going to happen from the beginning of the story, namely, something bad. When the boys burn the woods, Mrs. Cope’s child is the first to witness the ironic fulfillment of Mrs. Cope’s anxiety. Focalizing through the child, the narrator’s description of the final scene evokes the mystery of existence: “She stood taut, listening, and could just catch in the distance a few wild high shrieks of joy as if the prophets were dancing in the fiery furnace, in the circle the angel had cleared for them”

(193). This last image is an allusion to the three men, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, whom King Nebuchadnezzar threw into a fiery furnace but they were not harmed, as recorded in the Book of Daniel. Like King Nebuchadnezzar, who also thought that he was in control, Mrs. Cope is shown reality, which escapes her comprehension and her control. In the final analysis, even her daughter “ain’t hers” to govern.

To explore the mystery of freedom and identity, O’Connor often uses the vehicle of the relationship between parent and child. In “Good Country People,” the mother, Mrs. Hopewell, shares in a similar kind of shallow optimism as Mrs. Cope—also relating to the limitations of her parental authority. Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman, who talk in endless clichés about being realistic (e.g. “life is like that”) and open-minded (e.g. “everybody is different”), are in point of fact, quite the opposite. Mrs. Hopewell’s daughter Joy, however, is to a certain extent even more inured in the darkness of pride and vanity. With all of her higher education, Joy, who has renamed herself “Hulga,” has embraced the “gospel” of nihilism. The angels of the Divine Mystery announce the salvation of mankind to the shepherds, but Hulga has replaced the joy of the good news with the ugly old conceit of nihilism. She preaches to the con artist Bible salesman: “In my economy, I’m saved and you are all damned” (CS 287). In theological terms, the “economic trinity” refers to the Trinity’s manifestation to and being shown through man, but in Hulga’s “economy” there is no Divine Mystery to see or to show. Hulga continues, “We are all damned but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation” (288).

Hulga recapitulates Nietzschean notions of ethics—to stare into the abyss of the meaninglessness of existence and yet have the courage to go forward anyway. Hulga is in for a rude awakening when the Bible salesman reveals his true colors. He, himself, is an actual nihilist. Hulga’s recognition of her lack of awareness occurs when the salesman takes her leg. The narrator relates: “She saw him grab the leg and she saw it for an instant slanted forlornly across the inside of the suitcase with a Bible at either side of its opposite ends” (290). O’Connor metaphorically suggests that Hulga, like her nihilistic doctrine, is left without a leg to stand on.¹² O’Connor’s authorial agency both binds and emancipates Hulga and the Bible salesman in a way that reflects the mystery of existence and freedom. In this literary universe, each person is made in the Divine Mystery’s image, but each person chooses to work with or without grace to become more or less, respectively, like the Divine Mystery. O’Connor writes Joy into existence, but Hulga chooses to live by her own lights and contrary to her given name and higher calling.

O’Connor does not relinquish her characters’ capacity for freedom, even when they choose to kill. The dynamic scene of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” contrasts and colludes with the story’s agency, culminating in the grandmother’s brutal execution. What should be made of the two children’s names, “John Wesley” and “June Star”? John Wesley and his brother, Charles Wesley, are credited with founding Methodism. John Wesley opposed George Whitefield’s Calvinism, particularly the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. Wesley’s theology was to some extent both evangelical and sacramental.

¹² Hulga, who has “taken the Ph.D. in philosophy” (CS 276), seems to exemplify O’Connor’s remark in “The Teaching of Literature” that “it’s perfectly possible to run a course of academic degrees in English and to emerge a seemingly respectable Ph.D. and still not know how to read fiction” (MM 123).

He maintained that the Divine Mystery perfects the Christian through grace, which is granted to any person who has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. June Star's name indicates the phenomenon of the summer solstice, which occurs in the Northern Hemisphere between June 21st and 22nd.¹³ The event of the summer solstice has both religious and pagan connotations concerning the concepts of freedom and fate. John Wesley and June Star metaphorically suggest the "two sides," so to speak, of human action. Wesley can be seen as intimating the indeterminacy of grace or chance, which allows for symbolic action and freedom; whereas, June Star points, in a sense, to the certainty of absolute pre-destination or fate. The names of the children illuminate the central tension in "A Good Man" and in some way foreshadow the climax of the story.

In the climactic scene of "A Good Man," The Misfit projects his vices upon both the grandmother and Christ the redeemer. St. Paul ironically illuminates The Misfit's argument: "For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. / If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor. 15:15-17). Accordingly, insofar as The Misfit rejects Christ's divinity, he has no choice but to be as he is, i.e. "mean." In this context, where judgment has already been rendered absolutely, the work of grace is—or would be—impossible. O'Connor freely permits her characters to participate in the nihilistic culture of "A Good Man," which has profoundly influenced both The Misfit's character and the grandmother's character, but there remains hope for freedom—to do good rather than mere meanness, even after the Misfit executes the entire wretched family. The Misfit executes the grandmother in order to execute, in the sense of

¹³ A solstice occurs when a planet's rotational axis is most inclined toward the star it orbits—in earth's case, the sun.

accomplish, his inversion of the Christian dynamic between sin and grace. The final execution of the grandmother becomes the final execution of the law of fate: *where no sin or grace can abound, fate always already has been abounding*. The good news is the ironic reversal on The Misfit's action. Even with this ostensibly perfect expression of his syllogism, The Misfit cannot, in fact, prove his premise. Insofar as grace remains a possibility, The Misfit could be responsible for his actions, and he might still become "a good man" after all.

The best of O'Connor's stories deal with characters that do not have a clue that they are full of themselves. In "Revelation," the large and looming Mrs. Turpin lives in her own kind of self-righteous oblivion. The woman in the doctor's office, whom Mrs. Turpin deems as "the white-trash woman," makes her own judgmental comment about another one present in the office: "Look like some children just take natural to meanness" (CS 498). Amidst this waiting office filled with spiritual malady, Mrs. Turpin is content to believe that she is somehow simply special—God's gift to humanity. Mrs. Turpin says she likes to exclaim, "Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is! It could have been different" (499). The old woman says that nothing bad happens to Mrs. Turpin "as if they all knew that Mrs. Turpin was protected in some special way by Divine Providence" (504). Mrs. Turpin, for her part, spurns sacrificial love and lives in a fantasy world in which she is the sole province of Providential care on her own terms.

The flip side of Mrs. Turpin's admiration for herself is her disdain for others. Her prejudice against black people, in particular, is evidence of her bondage to her own blindness. Focalizing through Mrs. Turpin, the narrator remarks, "You could never say

anything intelligent to a nigger. You could talk at them but not with them” (505). Mrs. Turpin receives a revelation from the Divine Mystery about her identity not on top of some great mountain but in the pig parlor. The scene of the revelation indicates her Pharisaism by calling to mind Christ’s words to his disciples: “Do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you” (Matt. 7:6). The narrator says, “Then like a monumental statue coming to life, she bent her head slowly and gazed, as if through the very heart of mystery, down into the pig parlor of hogs” (508). This juxtaposition of “the very heart of mystery” and the “pig parlor of hogs” is an iteration of the *mysterium iniquitatum*. The greater mystery is how the Divine Mystery loves human beings, in spite of how piggish and priggish¹⁴ we often are.

As instruments of the Divine Mystery’s mercy, O’Connor’s stories do not let us use the characters as scapegoats very easily. The verses leading up to the command not to throw pearls before swine deal with the danger of judging: “Judge not, that you be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). To truly engage her texts, the reader cannot passively observe the weakness of O’Connor’s characters. While the reader makes judgments upon them, he must also look into himself and ask, “Am I Christ-centered or merely Christ-haunted?” According to O’Connor, if the answer is neither, that is the most horrific state in which a

¹⁴ Sin can be divided into carnal sins, or “sins of the flesh,” and spiritual sins, or “sins of the spirit.” Because the latter are more closely tied to the radical rejection of Providence, they are generally considered worse. The Catechism says, “The root of sin is in the heart of man, in his free will, according to the teaching of the Lord: ‘For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a man.’ But in the heart also resides charity, the source of the good and pure works, which sin wounds” (1853).

person can be. This monition is not for Catholics alone, but it certainly does not exclude them. O'Connor's fiction, in this way, reflects the writing of the Lutheran theologian and Christian martyr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who in a similar manner does not excuse his fellow Lutherans from the demand for authentic Christian discipleship. He says, "We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ" (*Cost of Discipleship* 53). O'Connor does not relent from castigating her fellow Catholics in the aesthetic realm. In "Catholic Novelists," O'Connor says that Catholics cannot ignore the criticism that there are so few Catholic artists and writers in America. She says, "I feel that it is a valid criticism of the way Catholicism is applied by our Catholic educational system, or from the pulpit, or ignorantly practiced by ourselves; but that is, of course, no valid criticism of the religion itself" (6).

The Horror of O'Connor's Catholic Tendencies

Bonhoeffer anticipates, in a sense, the horror of O'Connor's stories—the horror that so many of even her fellow Catholic critics have misunderstood and continue to misunderstand. O'Connor perceived that the modern reader generally is not possessed by a feeling of horror—at least not in the same way the medieval reader, for instance, might have been—when he is reminded of the four last things of death, judgment, heaven, and hell; nevertheless, according to Sacred Scripture, the fear of the Lord is *still* the beginning of wisdom, and it is this sphere of "fear" that is the realm of most of O'Connor's literature. O'Connor remarks about her own work, "When I see these stories described as horror stories I am always amused because the reviewer always has hold of the wrong

horror” (HB 90). The horror that O’Connor’s stories are written to arouse is the horror of our sins, not unlike the horror in the miracle and morality plays of yore. In the morality play, *Everyman* (c. 1485), Death says to the Divine Mystery that none will escape death: “And great pain it shall cause him to endure/ Before the Lord Heaven King” (38). Everyman ought to fear more, however, the Divine Mystery, since the Divine Mystery alone can save him from death’s finality. Death, then, proceeds to warn Everyman that he has forgotten his Maker, and “before God thou shalt answer, and show/ Thy many bad deeds and good but a few” (39). This type of horror is not to be fostered for its own sake, but rather as a means toward the most perfect kind of motivation for loving the Divine Mystery, which is the Divine Mystery’s love, itself.

Many critics today still have hold of the “wrong horror.” Worse than that, they often believe they have, per O’Connor’s instruction, rectified the misunderstanding of her contemporaries, when in fact, they have only exacerbated it. In *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature*, Ross Labrie says that O’Connor’s style and subject matter have to do with certain Calvinistic or Jansenistic tendencies as well a Fundamentalist theology. He diagnoses:

It is likely that the radically polarized view of good and evil in O’Connor’s fiction, her emphasis on the spiritual value of suffering, and her avoidance of sexuality sprang as readily from her Irish Catholic culture, with its Jansenistic tendencies, as from her absorption of Southern Fundamentalism. (212)

Both the spiritual value of suffering and the radical opposition between good and evil, however, are profoundly Catholic themes. Although O’Connor seems to avoid sexuality in her stories, which is not a particularly Catholic trait, Labrie discounts the crucial ironies and ambiguity within the stories that open them up to a wide range of sexual

possibilities. Sex in literature, of course, is often obliquely expressed, and O'Connor is, rather, a master of the art.

Labrie points to Motes, the protagonist of *Wise Blood*, and his special calling and character, in particular, to exemplify these so-called Jansenistic tendencies and concludes: "As has been intimated, O'Connor's view here seems to conform much more readily to Calvinistic theology—particularly the doctrine of election—than to Catholic theology, which emphasizes the universal accessibility of grace through the sacraments and the church" (212). Calvinistic tendencies, no doubt, are abundant in O'Connor's characters, as we have seen, but this prevalence of Calvinism in her characters does not necessarily indicate it in their creator. Motes is no exception. He also preaches atheism throughout most of the novel. Should we therefore conclude that O'Connor's view is secretly atheistic? With respect to what Catholic theology emphasizes—divine election or the accessibility of grace—it depends where one looks.

Notwithstanding Labrie's notion that O'Connor's stories are Calvinistic, O'Connor herself certainly did not think so. She writes to Alfred Corn, a young poet who had heard one of her lectures at Emory University in Atlanta: "Free will has to be understood within its limits; possibly we all have some hindrances to free action but not enough to be able to call the world determined." This is a rather precise formulation of the conditional existentialism of Catholic literary theory. She continues:

In some people (psychotics) hindrances to free action may be so strong as to preclude free will in them, but the Church (Catholic) teaches that God does not judge those acts that are not free, and that he does not predestine any soul to hell—for his glory or any other reason. This doctrine of double predestination is strictly a Protestant phenomenon. Until Luther and Calvin, it was not countenanced. The Catholic Church has always condemned it. (HB 489)

Labrie's diagnosis of O'Connor and her fiction is due, ironically, to some Calvinistic tendencies of his own that lead him to perceive only the "wrong horror," despite O'Connor's warnings. The Catholic sense that good is infinitely more powerful than evil does not undermine the Church's perception that evil remains powerful in its own right; moreover, the Catholic understanding of grace includes both its universal as well as its particular, i.e. selective, nature. With this more robust understanding of the Church's belief concerning grace and nature, we can recognize that O'Connor's presentation of Providence and human evil in her stories is thoroughly Catholic and not Calvinistic. All of this is not to say that O'Connor has perfect control over her fictional creation; on the contrary, she lives in the mystery of their freedom, which she says in her note to the second edition of *Wise Blood*, "cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen" (6, MM 115).

In order to appreciate the "right horror" in O'Connor's fiction, as she intended, we need to examine some Catholic principles of Biblical exegesis. In particular, the fact that Scripture has literal and spiritual senses, rather than a single "literalistic" sense, decisively distinguishes, in O'Connor's view, the monolithic approach of Fundamentalism from the polyphonic hermeneutics of the Catholic perspective. The Catholic theologian, Peter Kreeft, formulates the principle as follows: "interpreting a passage symbolically does not necessarily mean not interpreting it *historically*" (315). This principle works in the reverse as well: interpreting a passage historically does not necessarily mean not interpreting it symbolically. In fact, in Catholic Biblical exegesis, the two modes of interpretation coalesce to form the heart of Catholic *both/and*

theology.¹⁵ Although Labrie is correct in saying that the Catholic Church emphasizes the universal accessibility of grace, this by no means undermines the Church's simultaneous emphasis on divine election. The entire history of Judeo-Christianity, in a sense, is a story of election and grace. The Divine Mystery chooses Adam and Eve, Abraham, Moses, and Jacob. Christ is the *Messiah* (H: "the anointed one"), who fulfills the law and the prophets. According to Catholic theology, it is precisely through Christ, as the *chosen* Lamb of God, that redemption is universally accessible. St. Paul says, "We are children of God, / and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom. 8:16-17).

Some form of the doctrine of divine election, with its Biblical roots, is maintained by most Christians, including both Catholics and Fundamentalists, but O'Connor's Catholic perspective carries a more multifaceted and Scriptural understanding of its meaning than the Fundamentalist view. O'Connor does not have "Jansenistic tendencies," as Labrie calls them; rather, O'Connor's emphasis on what can be perceived as ineluctable destiny is only one side of what Catholicism refers to as *divine filiation*. In *The Message for World Day of Peace (1997)*, John Paul II refers to divine filiation as "the deepest mystery of the Christian vocation" and "the culminating point of the mystery of our Christian life." Hazel Motes is chosen but in a different way

¹⁵ In the first book of the theological trilogy, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI points out that the locus of Catholic Biblical exegesis rests in Christ as the Incarnate Word, who is *both* the Divine Mystery's Only Begotten Son *and* the human being by whom all are saved: "This universality, this faith in the one God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—extended now in Jesus' new family to all nations over and above the bonds of descent according to the flesh—is the fruit of Jesus' work. It is what proves him to be the Messiah" (117). Thus, the Divine Mystery's Incarnation in Christ—the Word Made Flesh—is the central mystery of Catholicism's *both/and* theology.

than it appears to him. His sin is not clinging fatalistically to his divine calling but rather running from it. O'Connor's characterization of Motes as an intractable prophet against the Divine Mystery does not conform more readily to Calvinistic theology than Catholic theology. On the contrary, O'Connor's so-called Jansenistic tendencies in her stories are Catholic precisely because they are presented, and ought to be understood, primarily in light of her Catholic beliefs of divine filiation, universal accessibility, and free will.

One might just as easily use Labrie's evidence for O'Connor's so-called Calvinism to argue that O'Connor was a Universalist. The critic might object, "You mean to say that O'Connor thinks that a raging, hypocritical, blind lunatic like Hazel Motes (or Enoch) can be saved? Well, in that case, she must think that *everyone* is going to heaven!" Either extreme—that all are saved or that none, or at least, only a few humanly determined elect are saved—misses the mark. Both radically deny human freedom, which Catholicism believes is built into the very fabric of the Divine Mystery's plan. O'Connor is confident in her Catholic perspective, not because of any arrogance that she comprehends reality better than others but because of the authority that Motes' name suggests in Christ's remonstrance against the Pharisees: "And why beholdest thou the *mote* that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?" (Matt. 7:3, KJV, emphasis added). The word "mote" is also in the Catholic Douay-Reims translation. The belief that the "Catholic," i.e. *Universal*, Church is the sole sacrament of salvation has long been a stumbling block for many, both Catholics and non-Catholics alike. O'Connor, however, believes it to be a life-giving paradox rather than a deadly contradiction.

The claim that O'Connor's fiction does not indulge in Fundamentalism does not simply rest on her being a practicing Catholic. Although O'Connor was fond of expressing the connection between her faith and her writing, the particular nature of her faith and her writing could not guarantee a faithful execution of her calling, inasmuch as Hazel Motes is neither ineluctably saved nor damned. O'Connor's stories are Catholic not only because she was a practicing Catholic but also because she consistently strove to be a Catholic artist. She was not predetermined to write as a Catholic because she was a Catholic baptized mere months after her birth. Such a view of her writing would be an iteration of "Once Saved Always Saved." Rather, O'Connor was an artist whose character and characters embodied the Catholic belief in *divine filiation*, since all of them "lived and moved and had their being" (cf. Acts 17:28) in a Catholic universe.

O'Connor's notion of a "wrong horror" implies that there is a "right horror," but this "right horror" refers to more than merely fearing "the pains of hell and the loss of heaven"—as a traditional form of the Act of Contrition has it. This prayer, which the penitent recites at the close of the sacrament of confession, continues: "But most of all because I have offended thee, O Lord, who is deserving of all my love and all good things." In *The Secret of Dreams*, the Spanish Jesuit priest and psychologist, Pedro Meseguer, says that human beings have a natural desire for religion—to know where they came from and who they are. According to Meseguer, religion is a human good, much like personal integrity, interpersonal relationships, and the acquisition of knowledge and skills. Playing on Freud's intimation that "sexual repression" is the cause of so many personal and societal ills, Meseguer suggests that modern man is not so much sexually

repressed as religiously repressed (185). He has not the freedom to express the love and faith for which he was made because he lacks knowledge of his origins. Meseguer says that Victor Frankl agrees: “It is in this spiritual unconscious, [Frankl] claims, that the source of neuroses is to be found, in repression of man’s natural relationship with transcendent being” (187).¹⁶ It is likely that O’Connor conscientiously uses Meseguer’s notion of “religious repression” in her stories, since in a letter to Elizabeth Hester, O’Connor says that she has discussed *The Secret of Dreams* with Dr. T. R. Spivey and that “the book is not as bad as the title would suggest and has some useful information in it” (HB 412). In any event, a good way to typify the majority of O’Connor’s characters is as religiously repressed—rather than oppressed—individuals, sometimes quite severely acting out in all sorts of bizarre and terrifying ways.

The Hubris of Hazel Motes

Now that we have discussed some of how O’Connor writes her characters into existence—specifically into a Catholic universe as opposed to a nihilistic, Calvinistic, or Universalistic universe—let us examine more closely her protagonist in *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, who seeks to accomplish the impossible task of annihilating his God-given character. Motes espouses an explicitly atheistic doctrine that maintains two contradictory and illogical corollaries—everyone must believe that there is no Divine Mystery, and at the same time, everyone must hate the Divine Mystery, in whom they do

¹⁶ Freud, who famously refers to religion as a form of “obsessional neurosis,” says in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “There is an unmistakable indication in the text of Sophocles’ tragedy itself that the legend of Oedipus sprang from some primaevael dream-material which had as its content the distressing disturbance of a child’s relation to his parents owing to the first stirrings of sexuality” (921).

not believe; or rather, Motes teaches that there is no *must* about it. A man *must* do nothing. He proclaims to his baffled spectators in front of the Odean Theater:

I preach there are all kinds of truth, your truth and somebody else's, but behind all of them, there's only one truth and that is that there is no truth... No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place... In yourself right now is all the place you've got. (165; both ellipses in orig.)

Motes has an alluring and seductive gospel, in a sense. Its “good news” is that you, and you alone, are the ground of your existence. You are in control. Perhaps there is no meaning outside of ourselves, or perhaps, if there is, we are ultimately unable to find it, which amounts to the same thing, but Motes' worldview allows for one thing at all costs—that thing is *me*.

Through her stories, O'Connor presents the universal mystery that reality is simultaneously simple and complex, rather than finally simplistic or essentially chaotic. Margaret Early Whitt makes the common claim that O'Connor “does not create characters who take religion moderately, halfway” (10). This assessment, however, of O'Connor and her characters is, in a sense, the antithesis of O'Connor's *modus operandi*. According to O'Connor, by fully and radically embracing true religion, a person is made more, not less, human...and humane. It is precisely because her characters generally do *not* cling to and live out their faith in the Divine Mystery that they resort to all sorts of strange, perverse, and godless behavior. O'Connor suggests in her stories that the worst of the lot, however, are not always the Christ-haunted characters, but rather the readers of her stories who deem they are in no need of faith and religion. For artistic purposes, O'Connor usually indicates to the reader this call to humility obliquely, even though she

says, “to the hard of hearing you shout” (MM 34). Along with the shouting, O’Connor might add that you also repeat things many, many times. The reader who approaches an O’Connor story with humility, in a sense, already participates in the profound mystery of divine communion, which is O’Connor’s greatest aspiration for anyone and everyone.

O’Connor perceives with her Catholic sensibilities that the Eucharist is the height and depth of the Divine Mystery on earth. In the Eastern rites of the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is referred to as the “Divine Mysteries.” While preparing to receive communion in the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, the communicant prays, “I believe, O Lord, and acknowledge, that you are Christ, the Son of the living God, who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the greatest” (*Catholic Prayer* 513). The recognition of the horror of our sins is for O’Connor the beginning of a divinely revealed knowledge that surpasses all knowledge—that we are, indeed, formed in the Divine Mystery’s image, and that no matter what we do, he loves us more than we could ever imagine. O’Connor’s humorous depiction of those who fail to open their eyes to the operation of grace is a form not of cynicism but rather, to her eyes, of realism. If there is a repression of certain sexual escapades, or at least the detailed description thereof, it is in order that the religious sense, with which O’Connor is particularly concerned, is more fully in focus.

Motes does not stand alone in his religious mediocrity and atheistic zeal. Emory Enoch serves as a forerunner to Motes, like John the Baptist to Jesus, as Ralph Wood and others have observed. Unlike John the Baptist to Jesus, however, Enoch strives to be *greater* than Motes at his own game, so to speak. As myopic as Motes unwittingly is, Enoch outdoes him. Motes represents himself as a kind of anti-Christ, so it is only

natural, in as sense, that Enoch, as Motes' prophet, seeks to surpass his master in the ridiculousness of his doctrine, notwithstanding the cleverness of Enoch's sycophantic scheming. Christ's forerunner, John the Baptist, says to his disciples, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Matt. 3:11). Enoch, on the other hand, ultimately sees Motes as a steppingstone to an "evolutionary leap" that Enoch takes for himself and by himself. When the narration leaves Enoch, the transformation is complete. He is no longer Enoch but rather "the gorilla," (198) and Motes is left behind.

Whereas Motes demeans himself only within the purview of the human species, Enoch, by assuming the gorilla costume, seeks lordship over non-human primates¹⁷ as well, and thus usurps Motes' title as "king of the beasts," the name Sabbath Hawks gives the protagonist (170). Enoch puts on the gorilla costume, in response to Motes' Polonian instruction to be true oneself, instead of putting on Christ, as St. Paul admonishes (cf. Rom. 13:14). Whit, among others, points out that Enoch "shares a name with the biblical Enoch," an Old Testament prophet with "exemplary faith" (18). What distinguishes Enoch from his Biblical counterparts, however, is not his faithfulness, which in a way is very strong, but how and in whom he places his faith.

¹⁷ In ecclesiastical terminology, a primate refers to the leading bishop or archbishop within a province or country. Unlike John the Baptist or St. Peter to Jesus, Enoch seeks to be the "primate" over Motes, the founder of the Church of Christ without Christ, even as Motes strives to subjugate Asa Hawks, an evangelist of "the Free Church of Christ" as well as his promiscuous daughter, Sabbath Lily Hawks.

Enoch's "faithfulness" to Haze, whose name denotes vagueness, is rewarded in kind with obscurity. Whitt notes that "'Hazel' is a reminder of the biblical Hazael; both tried to expunge God from their lives by using violence to destroy God's people" (17). As Whitt observes, Hazael means "God has seen." O'Connor, thus, plays with the English and Hebrew meanings. The Divine Mystery's omniscience and providence contrasts sharply with Haze's and Hazael's blind hubris. Haze's relationship with Enoch is a classic case of the blind leading the blind. Hazel Motes' name—both his first and last—indicates the pride of the Pharisees, whom Jesus denounces, saying, "Woe to you, blind guides, who say, 'Whoever swears by the sanctuary is bound by nothing, but whoever swears by the gold of the sanctuary is bound by the oath'" (Matt. 23:16). In a sense, it is this reversal that forms the heart of Haze's folly. He is called to be the sanctuary or temple of the Holy Ghost, by virtue of his humanity, but he desecrates himself by exalting himself over the more precious gift and giver of all gifts who resides within.

Motes' sin has its roots in the original sin of Adam. He desires to be like the Divine Mystery without and in opposition to the Divine Mystery. This fruitless usurpation of divinity is ironically the most effective way to lose the divinity that has already been given. When Enoch gets an invitation for Motes to visit Asa and Sabbath Lily Hawks, Enoch proclaims to Motes' face, "You think you got wiser blood than anybody else, but you ain't! I'm the one has it. Not you. *Me*" (WB 59). Enoch's assertion that he has *wiser blood* than Motes ironically continues the cycle of sin and ignorance that Motes participates in by seeking to be wiser than the false prophet, Asa Hawks. This vicious cycle began with Adam and Eve's original sin but continues with everyone

else's—"But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). The title of the novel—if it were a treatise instead of a novel—could have been *The Nature of Original Sin*. If Enoch were the central figure, perhaps it would have been called *Wiser Blood; or, More Original Sin*.

The Redemption of Hazel Motes

O'Connor says that the soul is "a moth who would be king" (Journal 39). Motes is haunted by the light of Christ, like a moth to a flame, but it is only by the end that he seems to choose to be consumed by holy fire. When Motes begins his ministry, he takes up residence with a prostitute. Motes "turns the light off"—metaphorically suggesting his turning away from the light of Christ—to fornicate with the ironically named Mrs. Watts in the dark, and the narrator tells a story about Motes that begins like a fairytale: "Once when he was small, his father took him to a carnival that stopped in Melsy" (WB 60). Motes, there, has his eyes opened. The ten-year-old Motes sees a naked woman on exhibition and hears his father in the front of the crowd crudely joke, "Had one of themther built into ever' casket, be a heap ready to go sooner" (62). When Motes escapes to his home, his mother knows that something is up and reprimands him: "'What you seen,' she said, using the same tone of voice all the time." Obliquely alluding to both the wood of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and the wood of the cross, the Tree of Life, the narrator continues: "She hit him across the legs with the stick, but he was like part of the tree. 'Jesus died to redeem you,' she said" (63). Motes' reply is reminiscent of the Misfit's logic. He says, "I never ast him" (63). According to Motes' wounded

Sartrean logic, his freedom is mutually exclusive with the Divine Mystery's freedom—either God goes, or he does.

The embedded story is similar to that of the little girl's story in "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," where O'Connor explores this mystery of grace. One scene, in particular, echoes Motes' own search for answers. In "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," two silly fourteen-year-old girls, Susan and Joanne, tell their twelve-year-old second cousin, the unnamed Catholic girl protagonist, how they saw a hermaphrodite at the local fair. The cousins recount the story and how they heard the hermaphrodite say, "God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way" (CS 245). The precocious girl "felt every muscle strained as if she were hearing the answer to a riddle that was more puzzling than the riddle itself" (245). The child is riddled with a vague guilt that haunts her. She wonders how we can be "the temples of the Holy Ghost." What "hits" both the little girl and Motes as a boy is the implacability of reality—what is *is* and cannot be otherwise.

To be a "temple of the Holy Ghost" and share "the light of Christ," one must first receive the fire of the Holy Spirit. Adapting and adopting the gnostic imagery of those St. Paul sought to convert to Christianity, the first century apostle speaks about this fire as a "secret wisdom" that restores us to our original state, of which original sin has robbed us. He prays that all would "have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, / in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2-3). Motes participates in the "secret wisdom" of the pagan Gnostics insofar as he is "like part of the tree" of carnal and self-serving knowledge. He is part of fallen humanity, who has

rejected the Divine Mystery's act of creation and redemption. At the same time, Motes is "like part of the tree" of Life insofar as he is created to be a temple of the Holy Ghost: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor. 6:19). According to the Catholic faith, Motes and his mother, like all human beings save Christ and Christ's mother, possess a "second nature," which they themselves have, in a sense, created by their own participation in sin, and which is often opposed to their nature as being created in the Divine Mystery's image. The narrator of *Wise Blood* relates, "[Motes] forgot the guilt of the tent for the nameless unplaced guilt that was in him" (63). The Catholic Church refers to this common human tendency toward sin as "concupiscence," but it is not the *inclination* toward sin for which Motes and every human being is personally culpable, but rather his choice to indulge it.

The Catholic Catechism describes original sin in a way that can be applied directly to Motes' own attempt to create the Church of Christ without Christ: "Seduced by the devil, man wanted to 'be like God,' but 'without God, before God, and not in accordance with God'" (CCC 398). Focalizing through Motes, the narrator says, "He felt that he should have a woman, not for the sake of the pleasure in her, but to prove that he didn't believe in sin since he practiced what was called it" (WB 110). The Catholic Catechism alerts us to the violent consequences of trying to forget our sinfulness through sinning and thereby sinning twice over (cf. 389, 1869). O'Connor says, "In my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality" (MM 112). She continues, echoing her catechism with her charming Southern

dialect: “This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world” (112). For O’Connor, the glorious mystery that Christ has redeemed us and the harrowing mystery that we may still choose to reject him together compose the very heart of the human condition.

Hazel Motes is a preacher who uses human stratagems to evade both sides of this reality. His art involves making a straw man of Christianity in order to dispose of it and, in turn, replace it with his own notion of truth. The form of his art is that of a fundamentalist preacher but his content is that of an atheist. The fundamentalist says, “Have you been saved?” Motes, on the other hand, proclaims on top of cars and on the street corner that *no one* can be saved. Motes’ protestations against the possibility of salvation ironically upholds the absolutist notion that “salvation” only consists in the supreme knowledge that there is none. It is a contradiction that Motes, himself, cannot finally accommodate. As the literary critic Mary Mumbach remarks, “He blinds himself, winds barbed wire around his waist, and walks on broken glass; ultimately, however, his dead body and empty eyesockets witness to that reality he sought all his life to evade” (355). In the final analysis, the nagging sense that he cannot be fulfilled within himself, by himself, prevents him from enthroning his foundational doctrine—namely, that he creates reality without having been, first, created into it.

Motes’ fall from hubris to humiliation to redemption follows the basic pattern of every Christian’s story. O’Connor’s preference to communicate her Catholic faith through story telling rather than through abstract philosophical statements elucidates her

character as an artist, but also as an artist who puts Christ and his Church first. In “Writing Short Stories,” she says, “A story is a way to say something that can’t be said in any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is” (MM 96). The question of whether O’Connor was primarily a Catholic apologist or an artist obfuscates the truth that O’Connor was a Catholic artist. The manner by which O’Connor proclaims the mystery of human existence is both Catholic and artistic. As Aquinas says, “Works are necessary to man in order to gain Happiness; not on account of the insufficiency of the Divine power which bestows Happiness, but that the order in things be observed” (Q. 5, A. 7, Reply to Obj. 1). Her characters’ excesses and limitations are beyond her control, but time and time again, O’Connor loves them into existence anyway. Although she desires their happiness, she does not force them to choose it. If this is not art, nothing is.

Interchapter Three: The Heart of Catholicism

“The Catholic finds it easier to understand the atheist than the Protestant, but easier to love the Protestant than the atheist.”

~Flannery O’Connor, *Habit of Being* (341)

Protestant theology, since its rise in the 1500s, has often maintained that Catholicism leads to godlessness and superstition, but O’Connor protests that, on the contrary, it is Protestant theology that provokes, to a certain extent, the atheistic reaction against the Divine Mystery’s presence on earth and the sacramental nature of the Incarnation. In *The Courage To Be*, the Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich calls the kind of theism that tends to view the Divine Mystery as *a* being (even a being who is the

“highest” one), rather than the Source of Being, as “theological theism.” According to Tillich, this limited understanding of the Divine Mystery “deprives me of my subjectivity because he is all-powerful and all-knowing” (185). This description of our relationship to the Divine Mystery does, indeed, sound similar to existential atheism.

Tillich characterizes the Catholic Church as peddling this false revelation of the Divine Mystery. He says, “Existentialism [was] anticipated by nominalism” and furthermore, “The nominalists built the bridge to an ecclesiastical authoritarianism [...] and produced modern Catholic collectivism” (130). O’Connor, who regarded Tillich as an astute theologian,¹⁸ says—albeit in different terms—that the Catholic Church, contrary to what Tillich intimates, has done very much to dispel modernity’s “theological theism,” since Catholicism has always maintained that the Divine Mystery is the Source of Being, as Tillich insists all Christians must do. The following is one of many instances in which the Catechism formulates the mystery of God as the Source of Being, rather than merely *a* being: “With creation, God does not abandon his creatures to themselves. He not only gives them being and existence, but also, and at every moment, upholds and sustains them in being, enables them to act and brings them to their final end” (301). Tillich, nevertheless, rightly observes that “theological theism” leads to existentialism and ultimately atheism. He says,

¹⁸ O’Connor says to Betty Hester, “It is [Catholics’] misfortune that [Protestant theologians] are much more alert and creative than their Catholic counterparts. We have very few thinkers to equal Barth and Tillich, perhaps none. This is not an age of Catholic theology” (HB 308). NB: O’Connor wrote this letter in 1958. I wonder what her response would have been if she saw the dawn of Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*? She says, “What St. Thomas did for the new learning of the 13th century we are in bad need of someone to do for the 20th.” It is this author’s opinion that O’Connor anticipates to a certain extent the work of John Paul II in particular.

I revolt and make [the Divine Mystery] into an object, but the revolt fails and becomes desperate. God appears as the invincible tyrant, the being in contrast with whom all other beings are without freedom and subjectivity. He is equated with the recent tyrants who with the help of terror try to transform everything into a mere object, a thing among things, a cog in a machine they control. He becomes the model of everything against which Existentialism revolted. This is the God Nietzsche said had to be killed because nobody can tolerate being made into a mere object of absolute knowledge and absolute control. This is the deepest root of atheism. It is an atheism which is justified as the reaction against theological theism and its disturbing implications. (185)

This theological theism, however, is not a result of Catholic theology, as Tillich suggests, but rather the eschewing thereof. In *The End of the Modern Age*, the Catholic priest and academic, Romano Guardini, provides an insightful analysis of philosophical thought leading up to modernism and provides a clue as to the true basis of theological theism. He says, “The risk is growing day by day that man will not use his power as he should,” and further elucidates, “power is never considered in terms of the responsibility of choice which is inherent in freedom” since its “only norms are taken from alleged necessity, from either utility or security” (83). Guardini argues that Catholic theology guides modern man *away* from the extremes of both atheism, on the one hand, and Protestant fundamentalism, on the other.

O’Connor embraced Catholic theology because she rejected atheistic existentialism, which dismisses the existence of both heaven and hell, but she also understood that according to the Calvinistic doctrine of predetermination there is only one of two places for which a person is predetermined: heaven *or* hell. There is no room for the remedial and necessary place for most human beings, which Catholics call Purgatory. Writing to Calvinists, St. Francis de Sales observes in “The Doctrine of Purgatory” that if there were no purgatory, even the slightest sin would prevent someone

from entering heaven, since heaven cannot contain what is defiled. At the same time, he says, it is clear that eternal damnation is too extreme a punishment for such peccadillos (X, par. 1). According to a Calvinistic cosmology, however and therefore, the heaven-bound person *can do no wrong*, since committing wrong would necessarily contradict his irrevocable status as saved. The person destined for hell, likewise, could do nothing but further his way toward damnation. Slavery, or we might say “theological theism,” is the only real possibility within such a scheme, since to be divinely led would require submission to a tyrant and *not* to be divinely led would be utter estrangement from one’s creator. The psychological ramifications of this doctrine are evident, and atheism is the logical escape from the false binary.

John Paul II echoes Guardini’s notion that modern man must be especially wary of this kind of destructive intellectualism, notwithstanding its assessment of the intellectual inadequacy of Calvinistic Fundamentalism. He says in *Love and Responsibility* that the gift of the Divine Mystery’s love manifests itself not in the mind, alone, but in the whole human person. The Catholic philosopher and theologian, Dietrich von Hildebrand likewise discerns in *The Heart* that contemplation of the heart and its affections is essential to a full and vibrant apprehension of the human person and of Christ’s Sacred Heart. According to Hildebrand, philosophy has often excluded the significance of the heart, thus failing to perceive man as “a triad of spiritual centers—intellect, will, and heart—which are ordained to cooperate and to fecundate one another” (46). Hildebrand maintains that the perception of the affections ought not to be equivocated lest they become synonymous with the false notion of the “animalistic and

irrational part” of man. The baseness or nobility of the emotions is not determined by their suppression or expression in the human person, but rather to their nature as *true* affections, i.e. affections that are not isolated from the object to which they fully and properly respond.

Similar to Tillich’s insight, in a sense, Hildebrand perceives that philosophical studies have often seemed to undermine the importance of the affective sphere, preferring to investigate only the intellect and will instead. This neglect of the heart, according to Hildebrand, is a form of abstractionism, which constructs theories about reality yet does not truly reflect upon reality because it does not consult it. The place that is given to the heart in the Scriptures and in the Liturgy is quite divergent to what is given to it in philosophical theory. Hildebrand says that this dissimilarity concerning the heart’s value in Sacred Liturgy rooted in Sacred Scripture versus its role in philosophical enquiry indicates a deficiency in Western philosophy’s pursuit of truth.

Hildebrand emphasizes that Sacred Scripture constantly points to the heart as a center of the person. Christ commands us to “Love the Lord your God with all your heart” (Mark 12:30). Hildebrand offers one of many prayers concerning the heart and the affections that the Catholic Church uses in her liturgy, which prays: “Draw, we beseech thee, from the hardness of our hearts the water of compunction, that we may weep for our sins, and by thy bounty may merit to obtain forgiveness. Amen” (35). Hildebrand supports his claim concerning the importance of the heart in understanding truth and reality with the rather simple reflection that it is “precisely the heart of Jesus which is the object of specific devotion, and not his intellect or will” (21).

Why, then, and how has philosophy relegated the affective sphere and its center to a place of relatively little significance in comparison to the intellect and the will? First, according to Hildebrand, it ought to be observed that the heart has, to some extent, been included in classical philosophy; nevertheless, it has been made to be, for the most part, the “proverbial stepson” within philosophy, using Hildebrand’s analogy. The affections sometimes have been granted a positive role in the full structure of the human person, but usually implicitly rather than explicitly. Hildebrand quotes Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, for instance: “The good man not only wills the good, but also rejoices in doing good” (3). Statements such as this one seem to be “reality stepping in,” says Hildebrand, so that when Plato or Aristotle observes specific situations, they are forced to contradict the lesser role they give to the heart in general statements about the human person. Perhaps to avoid unearthing such contradictions, Aristotle does not further elucidate that Joy is an affection of the heart—that a good man has both a good will *and* a good heart.

The Catholic devotion to the Heart of Jesus embodies her belief in the centrality of divine love. The Catechism states the sacramentally palpable and palpitating dual-mystery of Creation and the Incarnation quite simply: “God transcends creation and is present to it” (CCC 290). According to the Catechism, the Divine Mystery creates the universe not out of necessity but out of infinite love: “We believe that it proceeds from God’s free will; he wanted to make his creatures share in his being, wisdom and goodness” (295). Without a sense of the mystery of God’s love, it is easy to misconstrue the Divine Mystery’s desire to make every human to be like him as a form of “theological theism.” Catholic literature and literary theory has a special responsibility to uphold the

mystery, i.e. “the heart,” of philosophy and theology, both of which have sometimes tended toward a destructive intellectualism, as O’Connor and others have recognized, and against which, they vehemently protest.

Chapter Three: The Hubris of Mary McCarthy in *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*

“Dear Lord, I say many many too many uncharitable things about people everyday. I say them because they make me look clever. Please help me to realize practically how cheap this is. I have nothing to be proud of yet myself. I am stupid, quite as stupid as the people I ridicule.”

~Flannery O’Connor, *A Prayer Journal* (19, sic)

In the realm of aesthetics, one question concerning the relationship between the Divine Mystery and the artist, in particular, haunts the artist—both Christians and non-Christians alike: If only love creates, as Christianity claims, then why is it that many who demonstrably reject the Divine Mystery seem both to live beautiful lives and create beautiful art? The theological virtue of charity forms the height, length, breadth, and depth (cf. Eph. 3:17-19) of Catholicism and its conditional existentialism, yet as O’Connor articulates, persevering in charity proves utterly impossible without the aid of the Divine Mystery. The essential paradox of Catholic literary theory is that by love (*L: caritas*) we most reflect the Divine Mystery’s life, yet love is precisely that which we are incapable of obtaining without him. This paradox is at the very heart of Catholic literary theory. In other words, we must love the Divine Mystery in order to be like him, and though we are created in his image, we cannot even *like* him without his first *loving* us.

The reason I chose Mary McCarthy and Cormac McCarthy as two of the four authors did not have anything to do with their shared last name but rather their shared

Catholicism and rejection of the same. Notwithstanding their explicit or implicit anti-Catholicism, I found that each of them displays in his or her art something uniquely beautiful that points to the Divine Mystery even in his apparent absence. This dynamic of seeking the Divine Mystery, even or especially when he seems to be far away is profoundly Catholic, an essential attribute of *apophatic* theology (Gr: ἀπόφασις, “denying”). Flannery O’Connor’s story about her encounter with Mary McCarthy, whom she refers to as the “Big Intellectual,” sparked my interest in exploring McCarthy’s *Memories*.¹⁹ According to O’Connor, McCarthy expressed to her fellow diners that when she was young she, McCarthy, had considered the Eucharist “a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one” (HB 125). O’Connor writes, “I then said, in a very shaky voice, ‘Well, if it’s a symbol, to hell with it’” (125). O’Connor seems to suggest that it was McCarthy’s intellectual pride that led her away from her Catholic faith.

The reader may have noticed the similar titles of this chapter and the second to last section of the previous chapter, “The Hubris of Hazel Motes.” There are two brief points concerning the similarity that I would like to stress before proceeding. The first is the rather obvious difference between Hazel Motes, who is a fictional character, and Mary McCarthy, who is both the author and the protagonist of her non-fictional memoir. I have already mentioned this distinction in the introduction, but it is worth repeating because just as the human author’s act of creation reflects the Divine Mystery’s act of creation yet is also infinitely inferior to it, the fictional product of literary creation does

¹⁹ Despite O’Connor’s differences with McCarthy’s beliefs, she had high regard for McCarthy’s intellect, as evidenced, for instance, in a letter to Betty Hester, wherein O’Connor remarks: “They all—all the bright boys—love to take potshots at [McCarthy] because she is so much smarter than they are” (HB 203).

not have the same infinite and incommunicable worth of the individual person created by the Divine Mystery. To put it briefly and perhaps histrionically: Hazel Motes will not either rejoice in heaven or suffer in hell for all eternity. According to the atheist, neither will Mary McCarthy, but Catholic belief says she will, or is, and none but the Divine Mystery knows which.

The second point is connected to the first. The definition of *hubris* as “excessive pride” implies that there is a proper pride, and according to Catholic literary theory, there is. A scene in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Canto X, helps illustrate the difference between hubris and pride. The poet describes some approaching penitents in purgatory. They are required to carry large rocks, not because they had pride but because they had excessive, or rather, premature pride:

O ye proud Christians! wretched, weary ones!
Who, in the vision of the mind infirm
Confidence have in your backsliding steps,
Do ye not comprehend that we are worms,
Born to bring forth the angelic butterfly
That flieth unto judgment without screen?
Why floats aloft your spirit high in air?
Like are ye unto insects undeveloped,
Even as the worm in whom formation fails! (121-129)

Again, I wish to make it perfectly clear that when I discuss McCarthy’s moral actions as she, herself, presents them in her memoir, I am by no means making any attempt whatsoever to judge her soul. I know neither the true depth nor intensity of her inner

struggles, her joys and sorrows, and most especially how she loved or did not love in the final analysis. Incidentally, this mystery concerning the real person, Mary McCarthy, and the true purpose of her *Memories* largely contributes to the literary appeal of her memoir—together with the wit, elegance, and charm by which she portrays her childhood adventures and misadventures.

McCarthy is representative of a rather contradictory phenomenon that we might call “Catholic atheism,” in which baptized Catholics, who acknowledge and even enjoy to some extent the Catholic culture of their youth, simultaneously profess and proclaim their disbelief in the Divine Mystery. In *American Catholic Arts and Fictions*, Paul Giles discerns, “While not claiming Catholic ideas are ‘true’ in either a theological or a sociological sense, we can nevertheless analyze the internal consistency of Catholic culture and its power to shape thought in the world” (5). Giles’s observation, which here reflects McCarthy’s worldview, is true, yet one might counter with an O’Connorsque flair, that if Catholic ideas are not true in either a theological or sociological sense, then “to hell with them.”²⁰ When faith and reason are put forth as being in opposition to one another, it is no wonder that many choose “reason” instead of “faith;” nevertheless, Catholic writers like O’Connor and Percy seek to show that such an approach is a false, and ultimately, dangerous dichotomy. Both McCarthys, on the other hand, see reason and faith as opposed to one another, but Mary McCarthy is more explicit about her opposition than Cormac. Many critics have seen Hazel Motes’ “Church of Christ without Christ” as

²⁰ Part of the allure of the McCarthy/O’Connor dinner party story is, I think, that it vividly depicts O’Connor’s name and personality, “Flannery,” which derives from the Irish name *Flannghal*, meaning “red valour” (Behind the Name).

O'Connor specifically critiquing Protestantism, which lacks the Real Presence of the Eucharist, but perhaps, the critique applies more directly to Catholics, like Mary McCarthy, who try to maintain their Catholic identity while rejecting its central beliefs—the “Church of Christ without Christ.”

McCarthy's *Memories* as Anti-Catholic Confession

Memories is a collection of essays written from 1946 to 1957, when McCarthy was in her late thirties and early forties. Looking back and reflecting upon particularly her formative years under the tutelage of the Sacred Heart nuns, McCarthy plays on the irony that it was, figuratively speaking, within the very Heart of Christ that she discovered that the Divine Mystery did not exist or seem to care for her. She says, however, that her foster parents *thought* that the Sacred Heart nuns “had made me an atheist,” (141) implying that she had, on the contrary, made her own decision. She observes that no one made her do anything she did not want to do. This capacity for free thought and action forms the heart of McCarthy's autobiographical confession, wherein she performs historiography, literally the “writing of history.” She is not merely recounting events that happened to her. She is, so many decades later, actively remembering and re-claiming her atheistic profession—a confession that is not made in a vacuum but that is, rather, conscientiously and meticulously a protestation against her heritage as a baptized and catholically educated Catholic.

Utilizing the same mimetic structure as St. Augustine uses in his *Confessions*, except in reverse, McCarthy recounts the waywardness of her childhood not to glorify the mercy of the Divine Mystery, but to show that she is in no need of that mercy. Rather

than possessing Augustine's restless heart even with his loving mother, St. Monica, ever by his side, McCarthy seeks to demonstrate that she is content in her orphaned state, without God and without familial understanding. At the same time, McCarthy realizes that she is not alone in her unbelief. Through the writing of her *Memories*, she stands apart from, but also is very much a part of, a formidable clan of atheistic artists and intellectuals—not only her contemporaries but also the writers of previous generations, whom she reads and writes about, and the writers of successive generations, who will read and write about her.

The first definition that the Oxford English Dictionary gives for *confession* is “the disclosing of something the knowledge of which by others is considered humiliating or prejudicial to the person confessing” (1a). This definition of confession has been used to point to the self-revelatory nature of poets, such as Randall Jarrell, Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, John Berryman and Gwendolyn Brooks. These so-called confessional poets who wrote in the shadow of the great Modernists, however, were able to define to a certain extent a new post-war poetics by turning this definition on its head. Instead of experiencing humiliation and thus finding themselves at a disadvantage in light of their sins, confessional poets often darkly celebrate the psychological intricacies of their obsessions and unbelief. Some of them, such as Robert Lowell and his wife Elizabeth Hardwick, were mutual friends of O'Connor and McCarthy, and despite O'Connor's differences with them, she respected their art and artistry.²¹ O'Connor's friendship with

²¹ In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, for instance, O'Connor writes about Hardwick: “I think she's a mighty good writer. She's a big friend of Mary McCarthy's and about the same vintage” (HB 260).

and admiration for some of the confessional poets, however, does not undermine the fact that she deeply disagreed with many of their religious beliefs.

The poetic predecessors of the confessional poets include certain poets of the American renaissance, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman, whose poetry is, generally speaking, much lighter in tone, style, and effect than that of the confessional poets, yet maintains the same underlying radical individualism. The title and first lines of *Song of Myself*, for instance, immediately indicate the issue of Whitman's powerful and apparently all-encompassing voice, which propounds to speak in humanistic terms, even on behalf of humanity:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,

And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (lines 1-3)

Far less optimistic in tone, McCarthy's *Memories* helps illuminate the essential link between the self-celebration of Whitman and Emerson and the morbid self-revelation of Lowell and Berryman. These renaissance prophets and confessors of the modern age both profess and "confess" their atheism and agnosticism in counter-distinction to the confessional literature of old, modeled by Augustine's *Confessions*, which necessarily incorporates the penitential and finally redemptive qualities of sacramental confession.

Memories, as a whole, helps illuminate the crucial difference between the atheistic—whether "optimistic" or "pessimistic"—and theistic confessions, but we examine, in particular, the fifth chapter "C'est le Premier Pas Qui Coute" (Fr: "Tis the First Step that Costs"). The title of the essay is enigmatic, yet its first sentence clearly differentiates McCarthy's somewhat derisive tone from the ameliorating tone of

Whitman's *Song of Myself*. At the same time, it sketches their common defiance of authority: "Like the Jesuits, to whom they stand as nieces, the Ladies of the Sacred Heart are a highly centralized order, versed in clockwork obedience to authority" (102). Thus, McCarthy's religious teachers are characterized as cold and mechanically subservient, even as they are "of the Sacred Heart," which is supposed to be the emblem of Christian spontaneity and compassion.

McCarthy, herself, acknowledges that her confession—no matter how thorough or authentic—does not *conclude* with absolution, and thus, does not *include* conversion or eternal redemption as essential characteristics. When Fr. Heeney tries to bring McCarthy to sacramental confession, and according to McCarthy, makes light of her grave doubts about the Divine Mystery, McCarthy says, "Thanks to his incompetence, the only thing left for me to do was to enact a simulated conversion" (123). According to McCarthy's modern sensibilities, the sacramental attributes of confession belong to the age of medieval superstition. The second definition that the *OED* provides for *confession* is as "a religious act," specifically "the confessing of sins to a priest, as a religious duty; more fully, sacramental or auricular confession" (2b). Like McCarthy's understanding of the sacrament, this definition lacks the most essential characteristic of sacramental confession, namely, its redemptive and reconciliatory effect.

The Catholic Church, first and foremost, calls the sacrament "Penance" and "Reconciliation" to emphasize its efficacy as a sacrament of grace. The Catechism describes the multifaceted nature of the sacrament through its various names:

It is called the sacrament of conversion because it makes sacramentally present Jesus' call to conversion, the first step in returning to the Father from whom one

has strayed by sin. It is called the sacrament of Penance, since it consecrates the Christian sinner's personal and ecclesial steps of conversion, penance, and satisfaction.

It is called the sacrament of confession, since the disclosure or confession of sins to a priest is an essential element of this sacrament. In a profound sense it is also a "confession"—acknowledgment and praise—of the holiness of God and of his mercy toward sinful man. It is called the sacrament of forgiveness, since by the priest's sacramental absolution God grants the penitent "pardon and peace." It is called the sacrament of Reconciliation, because it imparts to the sinner the life of God who reconciles: "Be reconciled to God." He who lives by God's merciful love is ready to respond to the Lord's call: "Go; first be reconciled to your brother" (1423-24).

Notice how the Catechism capitalizes Penance and Reconciliation but not confession.

This seems intentional, since confession is not as particular to the sacramental event as the other two names. It is not its proper name.

One way of summarizing *Memories* is as McCarthy's disavowal of each of the essential attributes of Catholic confession, except as a disclosure of "sins," through the episodic revelation of her childhood, particularly her coming to realize within herself that the Divine Mystery does not exist. In "'One of Ours?': Catholic Readings of Mary McCarthy," Debra Cambell describes McCarthy's Catholicism as forming and informing not just *Memories*, but the entire body of her work—fiction and non-fiction alike.

Cambell observes at least "two distinctly Catholic elements that remained prominent in McCarthy's writing throughout her life and gave her insistent atheism a Catholic tinge" (102). Cabell says that these two characteristics are a "strange, but familiar, kind of asceticism" and a "recurring need to stop and examine her conscience at moments when the reader least expects it" (102). Cabell, however, does not make it clear that McCarthy's asceticism is rather distinct from the penitential nature of Catholic

confession, since her asceticism is not a means to Christian conversion. It is, instead, a parodying of authentic Christian penance. The second characteristic pertains to the self-revelatory nature of confession, but certainly not in acknowledgment and praise of the Divine Mystery. Despite McCarthy's repeated attempts to escape, it is this "catholic tinge" that she cannot avoid and consistently leaves her "Christ-haunted."

McCarthy divides *Memories* into nine chapters describing her experiences in chronological order, for the most part, from her early childhood until before she was forty, which she says in the last chapter was about six years before the publication of the same on March 16th, 1957 in *The New Yorker*. The chapters are 1) To the Reader, 2) Yonder Peasant, Who is He?, 3) A Tin Butterfly, 4) The Blackguard, 5) C'est le Premier Pas Qui Coute 6) Names, 7) The Figures in the Clock, 8) Yellowstone Park, and 9) Ask Me No Questions.²² The chapters document various episodes in the first four decades of McCarthy's life, such as her surviving her parents who died in the flu epidemic of 1918 when McCarthy was only six, living with her Catholic and abusive McCarthy relatives in Minnesota, living with her Presbyterian maternal grandfather and her Jewish grandmother in Seattle, as well as her famous conversion to atheism at the age of twelve while attending Sacred Heart Convent school in Seattle. In addition to each of these chapters, McCarthy adds an interchapter, in which she informs the reader what in the chapter may have been invented or inferred. This essay focuses on this conversion to atheism as recorded in chapter four, "The Blackguard," as well as its implications.

²² All of the chapters except for "To the Reader," "Names," and "Yellowstone Park" were first published in *The New Yorker*. "Yellowstone Park" was first published in *Harper's Bazaar*.

The recounting of the terrible suffering that she endured in her childhood, in particular, cannot help but bring the reader to a sense of doubt in the Divine Mystery, since an all-loving, all-powerful entity cannot exist, it seems, when even one child, such as McCarthy, would be left so brutally orphaned in life. McCarthy, as an artist, describes the difficulty of her situation, naturally, in terms of her art of memoir:

One great handicap to this task of recalling has been the fact of being an orphan. The chain of recollection—the collective memory of the family—has been broken. It is our parents, normally, who not only teach us our family history but who set us straight on our own childhood recollections, telling us that this cannot have happened the way we think it did and that *that*, on the other hand, did occur, just as we remember it, in such and such a summer when So-and-So was our nurse (5).

Like the protagonist's memory in a Dickens's novel, McCarthy's recollection of "the fact of her being an orphan" metaphorically suggests something much, much more. She is putting herself forward as an example of modern man, who has also, in a sense, lost his parents and has no one to tell him what has, in fact, happened and what he only thinks he remembers. Despite the irony of McCarthy's cool, matter-of-fact tone, she describes the most pitiable of facts—that we moderns are all orphaned, without hope of ever finally finding our way back to the simplicity and warmth of belonging.

James Joyce's *Portrait* and the Catholic Sacraments

Mary McCarthy's *Memories* (1957) is the most autobiographical of the four works in this study, yet it remains at heart a work of fiction, insofar as McCarthy imaginatively recreates her childhood according to her atheistic ideals in adulthood. McCarthy's formal education in the Catholic faith heightens the beauty of her work, even though she rejects that faith. A similar dynamic occurs in the highly autobiographical novel, James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916). In *Portrait*, Joyce

fictionally represents what McCarthy does in her memoir—the earnest perception that what Dedalus’s Catholic faith teaches him apparently gets in the way of what he truly desires for himself, both as a person and an artist. In *Invitation to the Classics*, Harold Fickett summarizes the plot as the dramatization of “how Stephen Dedalus, Joyce’s alter ego, transcends an earlier calling to the priesthood through becoming a writer, which the novel presents as the true priestly role of its time” (307). Since Joyce sees the artist as a kind of priest, and writing as his true “vocation,” one might say that Dedalus is not only Joyce’s alter ego but also his *altar* ego. The Latin word ‘*altare*’ refers to the “high altar for sacrifice to the great gods.” It is upon the altar, where “the power of the words and the action of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, make sacramentally present under the species of bread and wine Christ's body and blood, his sacrifice offered on the cross once for all” (CCC 1353). In *Portrait*, however, Joyce seeks to “transubstantiate” his fiction into reality by the power of *his* words alone. Joyce seems to present himself, in a sense, as the god to which his very body is sacrificed. Mary McCarthy repeats this Joycean action in her own way in her memoir.

Joyce and McCarthy present this anti-liturgical act, which is *effected* in human words without the invocation of Christ and the Holy Spirit, as the pinnacle of atheistic worship. They know that in the Church’s eyes, such an action represents the height of modernistic hubris and blasphemy. Fickett notes, “Joyce spoke of his stories as ‘epicleti,’” and adds, “In the Orthodox Church, the ‘*epiklesis*’ is the prayer for the Holy Ghost to transform the elements into the body and blood of Christ” (308). There is no need to look outside Joyce’s own Roman Catholic milieu, however, to see such

terminology employed. The Catholic Catechism says, “In the epiclesis, the Church asks the Father to send his Holy Spirit (or the power of his blessing) on the bread and wine, so that by his power they may become the body and blood of Jesus Christ and so that those who take part in the Eucharist may be one body and one spirit” (1353). Fickett observes that Joyce also utilized “the Christian term ‘epiphany’—a showing forth or revelation—to describe the moments of insight he wanted to capture in his work” (308). Joyce, in his fictional memoir, conscientiously utilizes the trappings of Catholicism without embracing the Catholic faith, and it is this apparently reverent but actually derisive approach that McCarthy assumes in her own *Memories*.

At the heart of Joyce’s/Dedalus’s conversion to atheism is the epiphany that his belief in the Eucharist as real would be inauthentic. To use Sartre’s words, the belief would be in “bad faith.” It is significant that Joyce’s epiphany concerns his own belief in, rather than the reality of, the Eucharistic Presence. The realization is similar to the Protestant epiphany that occurred many centuries before the creation of Stephen Dedalus and the Modern atheistic epiphany that he represents. Martin Luther proposed at the beginning of the sixteenth century that the reality of Christ’s Eucharistic presence depended upon the communicant—thus, a fundamental shift in the liturgical lexicon, e.g. from *transubstantiation* to *consubstantiation*. McCarthy, in her turn, will have this same epiphany as Luther and Dedalus. In a similar unconditional movement, McCarthy believes that confession and communion are real only insofar as human beings act. Providence is no longer primary. In fact, for McCarthy, the Divine Mystery’s action is not even necessary.

Joyce anticipates McCarthy's framing the Divine Mystery as tyrannical precisely insofar as he involves himself in the act of faith, which according to both Joyce and McCarthy is not a theological virtue but an anthropological vice, since it is placed in a fantasy. When Cranly asks Dedalus whether he is afraid that the Divine Mystery might kill him if he receives communion in a state of mortal sin, Dedalus replies: "The God of the Roman catholics could do that now. I fear more than that the chemical action which would be set up in my soul by a false homage to a symbol behind which are massed twenty centuries of authority and veneration" (287). Again, Joyce is here using a slight of hand to focus attention on the authenticity of belief, while taking for granted that the Eucharistic Presence is not a reality.

Since Joyce, via Dedalus, does not want to be tangled up with what he seems to perceive as obtuse Protestant thinking, Joyce seeks to distance his disbelief in the Real Presence with that of the Protestants; nevertheless, he fails to give evidence for the distinction that he claims. When Cranly asks Dedalus whether he intends "to become a protestant," Dedalus replies with the rhetorical question, "What kind of liberation would that be to forsake an absurdity which is logical and coherent [i.e. Catholicism] and to embrace one which is illogical and incoherent [i.e. Protestantism]?" (287). Dedalus's rejection of the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist echoes that of Protestantism, but he—and his creator, Joyce, with him—flatly denies the comparison. Instead of providing reasons for the difference, Dedalus tries to placate Cranly by paying Catholicism the underhanded compliment of being a "logical and coherent absurdity." The narrator cleverly leaves the question concerning the "incoherence" of Protestantism unanswered

and moves onto describing the beauty of the night, e.g. *Darkness falls from the air* (274)²³ and greetings of “Good evening” (276) quite poetically: “The air of wealth and repose diffused about them seemed to comfort their neediness” (288). By the time the narrator returns to the interlocutors’ dialogue, the reader might not notice that Dedalus does not provide a clear distinction between a Protestant and an atheistic rejection of the Eucharist.

Mary McCarthy, like her literary forerunner Joyce, centers her denunciation of the Catholic faith into which she was baptized on the rejection of the Eucharist, yet also like Joyce, the inadequacy in her argumentation does not seem to lessen the influence of her atheism on twentieth century writers, especially Irish writers. In other words, their Catholic dissent seems to affect most those of Irish descent, which in turn calls to mind another pun, that of Anthony Burgess’s critical study, *Re Joyce*, or as it is otherwise known, *Here Comes Everybody: An Introduction to James Joyce for the Ordinary Reader*. This passing down of Irish Catholic atheism from one generation to the next constitutes the re-Joycing of modern literary atheism. In *Irish Catholic Writers*, Giemza correctly recognizes Joyce to be profoundly influential for most Irish writers following him. Giemza points to certain Joycean characteristics in the work of Cormac McCarthy, Pat Conroy, and many others. He quotes the Southern Irish writer, Valerie Sayers: “When asked to define the ‘authentic Irishman,’ [Sayers] riffed on James Joyce’s *Portrait of an*

²³ Dedalus misquotes a line from “A Litany in the Time of the Plague,” a poem by the Elizabethan poet Thomas Nashe. The actual line is “Brightness falls from the air” (stanza 3, line 3).

Artist as a Young Man (1916): ‘The one living in silence, exile, and cunning’” (250). The full quote from Joyce’s novel is as follows:

I will tell you what I will do and what I will not do. I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use—silence, exile, and cunning. (291)

This riff is that of the atheistic existentialist. It pre-embodies the Sartrean belief that human freedom exists in opposition to, rather than in accordance with, divine freedom. The mechanism by which such a self-producing, self-reproaching person exists is necessarily solipsistic, and the mantra of “silence, exile, and cunning” is fitting for him.

In counter-distinction to this atheistic silence is a Judeo-Christian notion of silence, out of which the Divine Mystery loves the human into being and the human being, in turn, passes from unutterable longing for the Divine Mystery to perfect love and communion with him and with others in him. As the Psalmist sings, “For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him” (Ps. 62:5). This divinely inspired silence, according to Catholic belief, is in no way solipsistic but rather intrinsically communal because the Divine Mystery answers it with the creation of man and woman, whose being and character derives from their Triune Creator. Catholic teaching holds that while the Divine Mystery has no need to create man, man can create himself only through love. Pope Paul VI admirably describes this dynamic of conditional existentialism in *Gaudium et Spes*: “This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself” (GS 24). Paul VI reinforces the connection between creation and the mystery of the incarnation, out of which Catholic literary theory emerges, when he says, “For by the

incarnation the Father's Word assumed, and sanctified through His cross and resurrection, the whole of man, body and soul, and through that totality the whole of nature created by God for man's use" (41). In contrast to the Joycean notion of human freedom as being limited and delimited by the Divine Mystery's oppressive authority, Catholic literary theory envisions human freedom as verily defined and refined, propagated and exonerated, by the Divine Mystery's abundant generosity.

Joyce and McCarthy share in a profound skepticism for this paradoxical freedom that the Church always has proclaimed and celebrated. Closely related is the mystery by which the love of the Divine Mystery, the love of neighbor, and the love of self constitute a single benevolent action in the Divine Mystery's plan. At the center of McCarthy's adolescent conversion to atheism is her refusal to embrace the mystery by which human love becomes divine. After pronouncing that there was "no belief inside" of her, McCarthy says, "Curiously enough, for the first time, seeing what I had wrought, I had a sense of obligation to others and not to my own soul or to God, which was a proof in itself that I had lost God, for our chief obligation in life was supposed to be to please Him" (122). McCarthy presents as Christianity what is its very antithesis. Contrary to McCarthy's claim, the Catholic Catechism says, "Love of neighbor is inseparable from love for God" (1878). Going further, it compares love of neighbor with the immanent love within the Trinity—a function of man's likeness to the Divine Mystery: "There is a certain resemblance between the union of the divine persons and the fraternity that men are to establish among themselves in truth and love" (1878, cf. GS 24.3). McCarthy, as the adult author of *Memories*, perhaps does not recognize the intellectual pride that she

exhibits here, but in averring that she had concern for others without love of the Divine Mystery or herself, she in fact substitutes herself for him, since such pure and perfect love, according to both Judaism and Catholicism, has always been understood to be an attribute of the Divine Mystery alone. This dual-commandment of love of the Divine Mystery and of neighbor is foundational in both Jewish and Christian Scripture (cf. Lev. 19:34, Dt. 6:5, Mt. 22:36-40, Mk 12: 30-31, Lk 10:27), and both traditions hold that such selfless love, by which one loves without counting costs, is uniquely divine. McCarthy's doubt is human, but her self-proclaimed love of neighbor without the Divine Mystery is a grasping for divinity.

Understood in light of the Judeo-Christian tradition, McCarthy's and Joyce's feeling regarding this inverse relationship between loving the Divine Mystery and loving neighbor springs from a perspective that presents as mutually exclusive that which is in point of fact inextricably bound; nevertheless, their motivation might be noble, insofar as they perceive the difficulty of putting others before themselves in authentic love. According to Catholic literary theory, they fail to see the impossibility of it without divine inspiration. Christ says, "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). John records this admonition just after Christ says, "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me" (John 15:4). McCarthy and Joyce seem to be enthralled with authentic love—the love of others without counting the costs—but they fail to engage Christ's counsel that such love can only be realized in communion with him. According to the Catholic faith, such communion is particularly realized through worthy and

reverent reception of the Eucharist. The Catechism says that the sacraments are for the Church and for all through the Church, since “they manifest and communicate to men, above all in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love, One in three persons” (1118). Joyce and McCarthy, on the other hand, are baptized Catholics who reject such communion with the Divine Mystery and men, above all in the Eucharist.

McCarthy begins *Memories* by ingratiating herself to the Catholic faith she abandoned. She says, “I am not sorry to have been a Catholic, first of all for practical reasons. It gave me a certain knowledge of the Latin language and of the saints and their stories which not everyone is lucky enough to have” (24). With regard to Literature, she continues, “To read Dante and Chaucer or the English Metaphysicals or even T.S. Eliot, a Catholic education is more than a help” (24). She says, “If you are born and brought up a Catholic, you have absorbed a good deal of world history and the history of ideas before you are twelve, and it is like learning a language early; the effect is *indelible*” (24, emphasis added). McCarthy is playing on the Catholic belief that baptism, rather than a Catholic education, “imprints on the soul an *indelible* spiritual sign, the character, which consecrates the baptized person for Christian worship” (CCC 1280, emphasis added). Her apparently generous account of the abundant knowledge that a Catholic education provides culminates with this high praise: “Nobody else in America, no other group, is in this fortunate position” (24). McCarthy seems to argue *reductio ad absurdum* for the greatness of Catholicism when she then adds: “Nor is it a matter of knowing more, at an earlier age, so that it becomes part of oneself, it is also a matter of feeling” (25)—that the most important thing the Church teaches is compassion. The examples that McCarthy

gives for being grateful to the Church, however, imply an essential hostility to the permanence and efficacy of the Catholic sacraments, which according to Catholicism, constitute the very meaning and purpose of the Church's existence. Although McCarthy embraces both the knowledge and affectivity that the Church gives to her, *Memories* simultaneously recounts her whole-hearted rejection of the giver of those gifts.

McCarthy writes about her first Communion as a rather horrific event.

Accidentally having drunk some water, she remembers: "If I took my first Communion in a state of mortal sin, God would never forgive me, it would be a fatal beginning" (20).

One could understand that if the Catholic Church believed that an inadvertent breaking of the Communion fast sent the communicant to Hell, then such a religion would be a horror indeed. Fortunately, such is not the case. As the Catechism specifies, "The faithful should observe the fast required in their Church," (1387) which after Vatican II is one hour and excludes water and medicine. The faithful, moreover, are obliged to receive communion only once a year after Reconciliation and during the Easter season if possible (1389).

The narrator cleverly focalizes Catholic beliefs through the mind of a little girl. The girls' perceptions are understandably immature and inaccurate; however, the narrator makes no indication that the girl protagonist and the narrator, herself, misrepresent the Catholic faith. Although McCarthy employs such literary ambiguity to disguise the facts concerning the Church she criticizes throughout *Memories*, she also speaks plainly about the influence her Catholicism has on her from the beginning:

I am often asked whether I retain anything of my Catholic heritage. This is hard to answer, partly because my Catholic heritage consists of two distinct strains. There was the Catholicism I learned from my mother and the simple parish priests and nuns in Minneapolis, which was, on the whole, a religion of beauty and goodness,

however imperfectly realized. Then there was the Catholicism practiced in my grandmother McCarthy's parlor and in the home that was made for us down the street—a sour, baleful doctrine in which old hates and rancors had been stewing for generations, with ignorance stirring the pot. (21)

McCarthy uses this dualistic vision of Catholicism to establish the tone of her memoir, in which the reader is compelled to admire her artistry even if he sees and rejects her artifice. While denouncing her duplicity, he may celebrate the simple beauty and goodness of some as well as excoriate the ignorance and abuse of others, all of which McCarthy recounts in her *Memories* without properly distinguishing what is essential and what is accidental to the Catholic faith she purports to describe.

As the narrator herself says, she enjoys her Catholicism for solely “practical” purposes without acknowledging the permanence of the baptismal sign. That is to say, although Fr. Noonan baptized McCarthy at St. James Church in Seattle, Washington when Mary was a baby, she speaks about *having been*, instead of being, a Catholic because she believes in only temporal and not eternal reasons for her baptismal character. This rejection of the Catholic sacraments—baptism in this case—is also a rejection of Christ, since the Church clearly articulates that Christ, himself, provides the sacraments: “Sacraments are ‘powers that comes forth’ from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church” (1116). Furthermore, in opposition to the Protestant belief against the nature of the sacraments, the Council of Trent proclaims, “Celebrated worthily in faith, the sacraments confer the grace that they signify” (CCC 1127). For Catholics, both the giver and the receiver, the given and the received, all become the Body of Christ. McCarthy remembers her implicit acceptance of these Catholic beliefs in her childhood. Speaking for her fellow

students at Sacred Heart Convent, McCarthy says, “What we feared was skepticism, deism, and the dread spirit of atheism—France’s Lucifer” (104). She says that “Protestantism did not trouble” her, but from a Catholic perspective, it was probably her romanticized view of protesting against her Catholic faith that should have troubled her the most. In a sense, it is the protestant conception of the sacraments as signs but not realities that form the nucleus of the twentieth century atheism of James Joyce and Mary McCarthy.

Although there is a certain kinship between the modern atheists, Joyce and McCarthy, and their Protestant forerunners, Luther and Calvin, due to their mutual rejection of the Eucharist, there remains a difference in the nature of their disagreement with the Catholic belief. Atheistic Catholicism ostensibly accepts, at least, the coherence of Catholic beliefs and practices, whereas Protestantism, generally speaking, rejects the belief system entirely. Both McCarthy and Joyce in their respective autobiographic works seem to be part of the former group. In *Catholicism and Fundamentalism*, the religious scholar, Karl Keating writes about the anti-Catholic fundamentalist, Loraine Boettner, and his book, *Roman Catholicism*. According to Keating, Boettner’s book is one of the most influential works for Protestant anti-Catholic propaganda. Keating says, “Pick up an anti-Catholic tract, then turn to the same subject in *Roman Catholicism*. As likely as not, the words will be the same, simple plagiarism” (29). On the subject of the Eucharist, Keating criticizes Boettner for condemning Catholics for adoring “a wafer.” Keating says, “If Catholics are right about [the Eucharist], then surely the host deserves to be worshipped, since it really is God” (44). In contrast to Boettner’s incoherent anti-

Catholicism, Keating points to an anecdote from James Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, to illustrate alternative view of the Catholic belief in the Eucharist. (44) When Boswell asked Dr. Johnson, an Anglican, about "the idolatry of the Mass," Johnson replied, "Sir, there is no idolatry in the Mass. [Catholics] believe God to be there, and they worship him" (I: 376, as quoted by Keating; 44). This anecdote indicates to a certain extent why O'Connor is outraged at McCarthy for portraying the Eucharist as a "pretty good symbol." Having grown up Catholic, McCarthy knew well how Catholics adore the Divine Mystery in the Eucharist. The implied accusation leveled against believing Catholics is worse, in McCarthy's mind, than that they are idolaters—it is that they are unintelligent.

McCarthy reflects Joyce's "silence, exile, and cunning" with her attraction to the romantic poet, Percy Bysshe Shelley, who famously wrote the essay, "The Necessity of Atheism," and was therefore expelled from Oxford on the Feast of the Annunciation, 1811. Shelley chooses to believe that "belief is not an act of volition," (34) and thus, "the mind *cannot* believe in the existence of a creative God" (35). Shelley's critique of theism lay in that since its object is unintelligible, it is unintelligent to engage it. Shelley, therefore, rejects the thomistic distinction between essential incomprehensibility and relative incomprehensibility, whereby the Divine Mystery is fully known within himself as a trinity of divine persons but is made known to human beings according to their limited ability to understand him. McCarthy's favorite teacher in *Memories*, Madame MacIlvra, had a similarly sympathetic view of Shelley as the Catholic poet, Francis Thompson, who says in an essay on the dark romantic poet: "We reflect how gross must

have been the moral neglect in the training of a child who could be an Atheist from his boyhood: and we decline to judge so unhappy a being by the rules which we should apply to a Catholic” (68). McCarthy, however, does not excuse Shelley’s anti-Catholicism for the sake of admiring his poetry—she celebrates it.

Like Shelley, McCarthy romanticizes rebellion at a very young age. McCarthy says, “These discourses of Madame MacIlvra’s fascinated me, peopling the world with new characters and a new sort of hero-villain, alone, noble, bereft” (105). “Alone, noble, bereft” and “silence, exile, cunning”—these are the romantic descriptors of the atheistic ethos. They indicate the Sartrean existentialist, whereby the Divine Mystery’s very existence is impossible, since his existence would necessarily infringe upon individual freedom. Accordingly, the absolute existence of the Divine Mystery would preclude the derivative existence of even a single human being. Thus, his non-existence is not only the conclusion but also the necessary premise of Sartre’s existentialism. As Sartre asserts in his essay on *The Outsider* by Camus: “Since God does not exist and man dies, everything is permissible. One experience is as good as another; the important thing is simply to acquire as many as possible” (Essays 29). Like Shelley and Joyce before them, Sartre and McCarthy believed that they had disproved the Divine Mystery’s existence at a rather young age, but also like their forerunners, Sartre and McCarthy felt—to use the words of Shelley—“the hypothesis of a pervading Spirit co-eternal with the universe remains unshaken” (Atheism). Such a Universal Spirit, it seems, does not threaten the atheist’s noble silence, like the Divine Mystery of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob does. Thus, Dedalus

must say, “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe, whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland, or my church” (291).

Philosophy, History, and Poetry in *Memories*

McCarthy says that she intuited Shelley’s “co-eternal Spirit” as a girl. When Fr. Dennis tries to convince the doubting Mary of the Divine Mystery’s existence using the classic Thomistic argument that “every effect must have a proportionate cause,” Mary brazenly (she says “helpfully”) adds, “Except God” (121). Then McCarthy says, “But Father, why can’t the universe be self-sufficient if God can? Why can’t something in matter be the uncaused cause? Like electricity?” (121). McCarthy suggests that Fr. Dennis was unable to answer her objections and that his “failure made a great impression on the convent” (121). Christian readers might find a hint of dramatic irony in the situation, since McCarthy does not seem to be aware—even as the adult writing about the childhood incident—that the failure had also to do with her own inability to reflect on what Fr. Dennis was trying to teach her. Aquinas says that the existence of a co-eternal spirit is reasonable. Western philosophical thought consistently attest to the fact that one may reasonably maintain either that the Divine Mystery preceded or else was co-eternal with the material universe. A thorough discussion of how both the theories/theologies of how the Divine Mystery is the Ground of Existence is beyond the purview of this dissertation, but we will briefly examine the ideas of the medieval philosophers Avicenna, Maimonides, and Aquinas and their various takes on the subject.

The question of whether the writer exists before his work or is created simultaneously with his art reflects the philosophical enquiry concerning the Divine

Mystery's creative action. The crucial philosophical distinction that Fr. Dennis tries to explain to McCarthy is that the Divine Mystery is the Necessary Existent, to use the terminology of the Islamic philosopher Avicenna, whereas the existence of all else is derivative. In a work of creative non-fiction, like McCarthy's *Memories*, the line between the author and her work is, at least ostensibly, less stark than in a novel, yet there always remains an element of fiction in the historical; moreover, creative non-fiction, through its poetic aspirations, provides an ideal gateway to philosophical musing. Again, this relationship between poetry, philosophy, and history is not a new concept. As the sixteenth century Renaissance poet Philip Sidney, in his "Apology for Poetry," puts it:

Now doth the peerless poet perform both [philosophy and history]: for whatsoever the philosopher saith should be done, [the poet] giveth a perfect picture of it in someone by whom he presupposeth it was done, so as he coupleth the general notion with the particular example. (335)

For Sidney, the "general notion" is the work and limitation of philosophy and the "particular example" is that of history. Sidney employs the same Athenian artist, Daedalus, as Joyce to describe the consummate artist: "That Daedalus, they say, both in this and in other, hath three wings to bear itself up into the air of due commendation: that is, Art, Imitation, and Exercise" (355). These three attributes of "Art, Imitation, and Exercise" pertain to poetry, history, and philosophy, respectively. As Sidney suggests, Aristotle's notion of imitation, or *mimesis*, is first enacted in the work of history and expanded into the creative act. Likewise, the exercise of the mind is most acutely performed in the philosophical act, but poetry, according to Sidney, transcends the limitations of both history and philosophy by combining their respective powers.

Although Daedalus flew too high, Sidney implies that we must still remember Icarus's admonition not to fly too low as well.

Speaking the truth—whether philosophically or historically—is poetically imbued insofar as it reflects the act of primal creation, and McCarthy is known for her particular concern for speaking the truth. In the foreword to Mary McCarthy's *Intellectual Memoirs*, Robert Lowell's wife and McCarthy's good friend Elizabeth Hardwick refers to McCarthy's emphasis on writing as truth-telling: "If one would sometimes take the liberty of suggesting caution to her, advising prudence or mere practicality, she would look puzzled and answer: but it's the truth" (xi). Hardwick alludes to McCarthy's essay "The Fact of Fiction" (1960) to indicate McCarthy's "somewhat obsessional concern for the integrity of sheer fact in matters both trivial and striking" (x). In a *New York Times* book review of *Memories* (May 18, 1957), Charles Poore anticipates Hardwick's insight. Concerning the memories portrayed in *Memories*, Poore says, "This or that episode, she will suggest again and again, could not possibly have happened as she said it did, since the iron facts were not that way at all." Poore adds, "The old question whether what we remember from childhood is rooted in fact or will to believe is pursued relentlessly." This near-obsession for McCarthy of finding and expressing the truth certainly has a role in her leaving her Catholic faith, but it also provides a way to return to the same.

Memories provides a superb opportunity to meditate on the fact in fiction and the fiction in fact. Catholic literary theory is rooted in the philosophical knowledge and God-given faith that the Divine Mystery exists, and the literary artist brings to bear the poetic structure inherent in the world she creates as a reflection of the divine economy. In "On

the Eternity of the World” (*De Aeternitate Mundi*), Aquinas philosophically anticipates McCarthy’s poetic musings in *Memories* concerning the creation of the universe or whether the universe is eternal. Aquinas says, “We thus ought to determine whether there is any contradiction between these two ideas, namely, to be made by God and to have always existed” (par. 5). Aquinas goes on to make the distinction that this assertion is not necessarily heretical even if it turns out to be false. In other words, as long as one maintains that the Divine Mystery is the Source of Existence, to inquire whether the universe co-existed with him can be a fruitful and valid philosophical investigation—even though the Church understands it to be a falsity. At the very beginning of the essay, Aquinas proclaims, “Let us assume, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that the world had a beginning in time” (par. 1); nevertheless, immediately after this affirmation of what the Catholic Church teaches, Aquinas points out that we still need to discuss the possibility of the eternity of the universe, i.e. whether it is reasonable to think that the universe is eternal. Although Aquinas believes what the Church teaches—that the Divine Mystery existed before the universe notwithstanding the inadequacy of language to express non-temporal reality—he goes to great lengths to show that the notion of a co-eternal universe with the Divine Mystery as the “Necessary Existent,” as certain other medieval philosophers believed, is still a reasonable proposition. According to Aquinas, it seems that there cannot be not too many, but rather too few, questions asked about the Divine Mystery, humanity, and the universe. For Aquinas, it is acceptable to ask some of the wrong questions, but what is unacceptable is to stop asking questions when the wrong ones have given inadequate answers.

Memories is, in a sense, a poetic rendering of the thomistic investigation into the nature of fact and fiction, that is, creation as a historical as well as an imaginative event. Before examining the etymological connections between the words facts and fiction, let us briefly outline Aquinas's philosophical reasoning, which to a certain extent informs McCarthy's art. Concerning the distinction between temporal and ontological priority, Aquinas makes arguments similar to those of the Islamic philosopher Avicenna (980-1037 AD) and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides (1135-1204 AD). Aquinas says, "First, no cause instantaneously producing its effect necessarily precedes the effect in time. God, however, is a cause that produces effects not through motion but instantaneously. Therefore, it is not necessary that he precede his effects in time" (par. 7). Avicenna, and Maimonides in his turn, uses the example of the key and hand to elucidate the non-temporality of the efficient cause. The turning hand causes the key to turn, even though the two turn simultaneously. Aquinas uses the example of fire to illuminate it: "At whatever instant a thing exists, at that instant it can begin to act, as is clear in the case of all things that come to be by generation: in the very instant at which there is fire, the fire heats" (par. 8). The Christian, Jewish, and Muslim medieval philosophers each agree that although the Divine Mystery must ontologically precede the created universe, he does not need to precede it temporally to be the Divine Mystery.

As we have said, it is precisely mystery and wonder that enlivens both philosophy and poetry. McCarthy herself says, "What I liked in the Church, and what I recall with gratitude, was the sense of mystery and wonder" (36). The existence of the Divine Mystery is, indeed, wondrously intricate. Perhaps Fr. Dennis did not want to argue the

Divine Mystery's existence with the twelve-year-old McCarthy for other reasons than an inability to explain it coherently, as McCarthy suggests. In any case, the fact that he does not convince McCarthy of intellectual error does not necessarily indicate a failure on his part. By including conversations like this one with Fr. Dennis, however, McCarthy incorporates an important element of philosophical enquiry into her memoir. McCarthy along the way thinks that she undoes the Church's belief in the Resurrection of the Body by asking questions about cremation and cannibalism. She admits, "At the time, I did not know that this problem had been treated by Aquinas, and with a child's pertinacity, I mined away at the foundations of the Fortress Rock" (115). McCarthy, as the adult author of *Memories*, however, fails to give any more—or better—reasons for her atheism than her twelve-year-old alter ego. She does not cease trying to "mine away at the foundations of the Fortress Rock" as the adult writer of *Memories*. Even with decades of conscientiously striving to undermine the indelible mark of her baptismal character, it seems McCarthy remains—whether she likes it or not—Christ-haunted.

McCarthy's Novel Ideas

The description of novel-making as history-making can elucidate, in a sense, the act of making poetry as essentially a philosophical act. As has been previously discussed, philosophy and poetry are essentially connected through the action of wonderment. The historian, too, is concerned with wonder, since the historical fact, insofar as it is real, is wondrous. Another way of expressing what unites the poet with the philosopher and the historian is that all are after the truth. The Catholic philosophical tradition holds that the historicity of a thing maintains a kind of primacy over that which is merely imagined or

conceived. This primacy is at the heart of St. Anselm's ontological argument for the existence of the Divine Mystery. For Anselm, the Divine Mystery must exist because he is greater than anything that can be conceived. Here is the crucial part: If the thing conceived is not also real, then the thing conceived is certainly not the Divine Mystery. The Kantian counter-argument that because a person imagines money to be in his pocket does not make it exist is a *non-sequitur*, since money—unlike the Divine Mystery—is not that which nothing is greater.

McCarthy's memoir is a modern work of creative non-fiction, but when the ancient roots of the novel-genre are studied, *Memories* ought to be considered a novel alongside the fictional prose that we are examining in this dissertation. The etymology of "novel" and its accompanying history helps us to see the overlap between the novel and the work of creative non-fiction. The *OED* lists the following as the fourth definition of *novel*: "a. Any of a number of tales or stories making up a larger work; a short narrative of this type, a fable. Usu. in pl. Now *hist.*" Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, for instance, is divided up into "novels" in this sense, e.g. "Novel I: *Ser Ciappelletto cheats a holy friar by a false confession, and dies; and, having lived as a very bad man, is, on his death, reputed a saint, and called San Ciappelletto*" (22). Immediately afterward, however, the *OED* provides this more current definition: "b. A long fictional prose narrative, usually filling one or more volumes and typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity; a book containing such a narrative." The second definition explicitly requires that the work be fictional, but the characteristic

of “typically representing character and action with some degree of realism and complexity” is what especially connects the novel to the memoir and fact to fiction.²⁴

McCarthy wrote *Ideas and the Novel* in the last decade of her life. There she teaches an aesthetic philosophy that is consistent with that of the twelve-year-old atheist, whom she says she had become in *Memories*. In the title essay, McCarthy expresses some novel sentiments about the novel that spring from her lost understanding of both her finitude as a human and infiniteness in the Divine Mystery. She smugly looks upon the older understanding of the novelist’s calling and calls it smug. Using Henry James as her whipping boy, so to speak, McCarthy says, “The power of the novelist insofar as he was a supreme intelligence was to free himself from the work-load of commentary and simply, awesomely, to show: his creation was beyond paraphrase and reduction” (4). This notion of authorship—despite McCarthy’s tone—is not antiquated, but it is ancient. It is what O’Connor understands the novel to be when she says, “A story is a way to say something that can’t be said in any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is” (*MM* 96). O’Connor’s observation is not born out of arrogance; on the contrary, it comes from a profound humility that recognizes the time-honored tradition that words are wonderful and mysterious. McCarthy’s cynicism toward the awesome calling of the artist is a form of false humility, since it refuses to acknowledge what most of humanity has long understood concerning the divine calling and inspiration

²⁴ Going back further, the OED lists the word novel as originally meaning “a new shoot or tree” in Latin, which then naturally “grew” into its meaning as “something new,” as expressed in the 17th century play, *The Brazen Age*, by Thomas Heywood: “Do you wonder..To see this Prince lye dead? Why that’s no *nouell*, All men must dye” (from OED, emphasis added). Considering the ancient “roots” of the word *novel*, it seems that it is, in a sense, a deeply *logocentric* term.

of the artist. McCarthy says that James “etherealized the novel beyond its wildest dreams and perhaps etherized it as well” (6). Her wordplay here falls flat, since neither of her claims about James is evinced except within the framework of her flawed conception of the novel’s structure. Making much ado about James’ preference to focus less on “laundry lists and drains” (14) and more on ideas, McCarthy mistakes James’ particular style with artistic inadequacy. In a similar fashion to the misguided critics who accuse O’Connor of being Puritanical, McCarthy says James is excessively austere. She says, “James, however, is not an ironist; no Puritan can be” (7). Although it is debatable whether James is an ironist—since “sublime” seems to describe better the effect of his narration—it is out of the question that he was Puritanical, at least in the sense that McCarthy implies.

McCarthy’s errors concerning the nature of fact and fiction in the novel do not end with her criticism of James. In the same collection of essays, McCarthy begins her essay on *Crime and Punishment* on the right foot with the following conventional yet profound insight: “You could say that *Crime and Punishment* was a novel about the difference between theory and practice” (92). McCarthy’s observation would have sufficed, but she cannot help adding the inane qualification: “Well, if you were a philistine, you could” (92). McCarthy, while recognizing the splendor of *Crime and Punishment* (what literary critic could not?), misses the most evident reason for the novel’s genius. She persists in forgetting the crucial distinction between mere thinking and contemplation, between fruitless sentiment and authentic leisure. It is not the same thing at all to recklessly repeat any given hackneyed cliché than to approach reverently a

particular mystery in myriad ways. The difference between theory and practice is immanently related to the *topos* of the Divine Mystery as artist. A theory must be put into practice in some way or other in order to have any meaning—even if it possesses horrific significance, as in the case of Raskolnikov’s realized theory of killing Alyona, the pawnbroker, and the unforeseen murder of her sister, Lizaveta. Notwithstanding the ostensibly “philistine” nature of the statement, *Crime and Punishment* is, indeed, a novel concerning the subtle yet immense difference between love as a mere sentiment and love that lives in action, between a head full of stagnant ideas and a heart full of dynamic vivacity, between the idea and the reality, and between theory and practice.

Memories is only one of three autobiographies that McCarthy wrote. The other two are *How I Grew* and *Intellectual Memoirs*. McCarthy wrote *Memories* when she was in her thirties, whereas she wrote *How I Grew* in her seventies. It seems that she did not grow with regard to her atheistic beliefs. The intervening forty years of retrospect does not seem to change her mind and heart with respect to her *Memories* and the centrality of her conversion to atheism. She begins *How I Grew*: “I was born as a mind during 1925, my bodily birth having taken place in 1912” (1). This “birth of the mind” coincides with McCarthy’s discussion with Fr. Dennis. It mimics Christian baptism, which is the second birth into the Body of Christ, and mocks the words of St. Paul: “Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). In *Catholic Women Writers*, Stacey Donohue says that McCarthy’s *Memories* “details both the positive (love of beauty and learning, Latin) and the negative (vulgarity, lies, hypocrisy)

aspects of her Catholic education” (236). This summation of *Memories*, however, belies McCarthy’s project because it fails to see that the positive details about the Church that she records are external and accidental whereas the negative aspects are internal and essential. McCarthy, more often than not, condescends to build up the experiences of her Catholic upbringing only to tear down without warrant the Church at her sacramental heart. The sins and inadequacies she deems she finds in certain individuals are unfairly attributed to the Church as a whole. The vulgarity, lies, and hypocrisy that McCarthy says the Church teaches are those that she has imagined in her own self-renewed mind.

McCarthy’s ideas on the novel are not new; in fact, they are born out of that most ancient of evils—pride. As Thompson did for Shelley, we will “decline to judge” McCarthy, although she was, in fact but not in deed, a Catholic. The philosophical concept upon which we spend the most time contemplating in this dissertation is that of the human will—its existence and attributes and especially how it might interact with the divine will or, if the Divine Mystery does not exist or is unknowable, the absence thereof. McCarthy engages in the universal human activity of creating herself through her choices—through writing and rewriting her own history, so to speak. Existentialists generally emphasize this godlike ability in man. The problem is that they often emphasize man’s divinity in opposition to that of the Divine Mystery’s, which is to say—figuratively speaking—they emphasize man’s freedom and the Divine Mystery’s love right out of existence. Through the tenets of atheistic existentialism, moreover, McCarthy conflates fact and fiction in an absolute sense. If I am the ground of my own existence, then what I make of my life alone *is* reality. The horror of it is that—due to the reality

that I am not the Necessary Existent despite my insistent longing to be so—what I have made can only end and continue in death. As the OED quotes Althea in *The Brazen Age*, by the early seventeenth century playwright, Thomas Heywood: “Do you wonder..To see this Prince lye dead? Why that’s no nouell, All men must dye.” Death, truly, is as old as Adam.

The way in which Catholics speak, or ought to speak, about human “self-creation” requires, rather than eliminates, the Divine Mystery as their creator. Augustine’s long work entitled *De Trinitate* (*On the Trinity*) examines how the revelation of the Trinity was foreshadowed in the Old Testament and revealed in Jesus Christ. Augustine speaks about “vestiges” in the Divine Mystery’s creation that reflect and refer to his Trinitarian presence. One of these vestiges is the trinity of memory, understanding, and will, which compose the human spirit and which more or less correspond to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, respectively. The Catholic Church teaches that the Divine Mystery’s revelation of himself to humanity continually unfolds even though it is fully revealed in Christ. The revelation of the Divine Mystery culminates in the mystery of the Incarnation. The Incarnation is predicated upon the Christian mystery concerning the triune nature of the Divine Mystery. According to Christian tradition, the Divine Mystery is three Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each Person of the Trinity is co-eternal and equally the Divine Mystery, and together, they are the same. Jesus is the Son of the Divine Mystery made man. By loving humanity even until death, and by rising again, Jesus saves rather than abandons the children of the Divine Mystery. Although he fully reveals himself in Jesus, humanity’s relationship with him increasingly manifests

itself through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, his burning love for his people is just as vibrant at the present moment as it ever has been and will ever be.

McCarthy, in a sense, supremely illustrates in her novel-making the way in which Augustine says the human mind and heart images the Triune Mystery of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. McCarthy excellently and artistically recalls her vivid *memories* using her acute *understanding*, the two of which are united in love by her powerful *will*, which like the Holy Spirit pours forth onto the pages of *Memories* and many other of her works. To use Sidney's terms, McCarthy adeptly utilizes her *philosophical* mind to explore her own *history* and what emerges by this performance of her will—this love of and within herself—is often *poetry*. McCarthy is ineluctably made in the image of the Divine Mystery, even as she strives with the very freedom that he has granted her, to become less and less like her creator and more and more like something of her own making. We can only hope that by her death she realized that making something out of oneself does not necessarily mean forgetting the family from which one has come.

The Jewish Presence in *Memories*

McCarthy was a good friend of the Jewish intellectual, Hannah Arendt, and speaks about her own Jewish heritage in *Memories*. In the very first paragraph of *Memories*, McCarthy says, “‘That Jewish grandmother of yours...!’ Jewish friends have chided me, skeptically, as though to say, ‘Come now, you don’t expect us to believe that your grandmother was Jewish’ ” (3). She quickly adds, “Indeed she was” (3). With careful literary symmetry, McCarthy ends *Memories* with an enigmatic account of her trying to find her Jewish grandmother’s “whachamacallit.” When the nurse hands a hand

mirror to the grandmother, McCarthy narrates the last line: “At that moment, the fact that my grandmother was senile became real to me” (245). McCarthy’s “Jewish connection” is intriguing, and the Jewish heritage of “God and the Intellect” is an important component of Catholic literary theory, which insists upon the unity that exists between faith and reason.

Catholicism, in general, is deeply indebted to and in profound continuity with the Jewish religion. In *The Crucified Rabbi*, Taylor Marshall admirably describes the essential connection between Judaism and Catholic Christianity:

The Jewish people continue as a sign to the Gentiles, and Gentiles should revere the Jewish people as kinsmen of Christ. After all, is it not the case that Catholics worship a Jewish Rabbi as the very Son of God and identify Him as the Jewish Messiah? The faith and flesh of Israel are integral to the humanity of the Redeemer. Catholics also show great veneration for the Jewish maiden, Mary the Mother of the Messiah and extol her as the Queen of Heaven.

The Original Apostles, from which every Catholic bishop succeeds, were Jewish. Jewish authors wrote every book of the Catholic Bible, with the exception of the Gospel of St. Luke and the Book of Acts. The liturgy of the Mass derives from the prayers of the Jewish synagogue and temple. We teach our children the Hebrew stories about Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Esther, and Daniel. (26-27)

As Marshall observes from a Catholic perspective, the Jewish-Catholic philosopher and martyr, Edith Stein—also known as St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross—embodies the kinship between Jews and Catholics in the twentieth century. O’Connor wrote to Betty Hester that along with Simone Weil, who was also Jewish, Edith Stein “interested her most” of twentieth century women (HB 93). Although Stein was born into a practicing Jewish family, she became, like McCarthy, an atheist before entering her teens. She studied under and worked as a teaching assistant to the phenomenological philosopher Edmund Husserl. Like McCarthy’s friend, Arendt, Stein also worked with Martin

Heidegger, who succeeded her as Husserl's teaching assistant. It was not until visiting her Lutheran friends at the age of thirty that Stein read the autobiography of the doctor of the Church, St. Teresa of Avila, and began her conversion to Catholicism. In *Catholic Women Writers*, Paul Majkut says, "The day after reading St. Teresa of Avila, Stein bought a Catholic catechism and began a life of study and devotion that would continue to the day of her martyrdom" (364). She was baptized Catholic on January 1st, 1922, a few months after the Avila incident; became a Discalced Carmelite novice in 1934 as Sister Teresa Benedicta (Blessed by) of the Cross; and died a martyr at Auschwitz on August 9th, 1942.

St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross maintained a love for both St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thérèse of Lisieux. McCarthy recognizes in *Memories* that names "have more significance for Catholic children than they do for other people" (129). This signification of names is yet another connection between Judaism and Catholicism. The names of the Jewish prophets and patriarchs all carry some significance. For Catholics, Jesus' name, which in Hebrew means, "God Saves" is, of course, of particular importance. McCarthy was blessed with two highly meaningful names—Mary and Therese. Unlike Mary Flannery O'Connor, Mary Therese McCarthy did not implore the assistance of her names' saintly predecessors; however, she mentions the meaning of her name in her memoir: "My own, I learned, besides belonging to the Virgin [Mother of God] and Saint Mary of Egypt, originally meant 'bitter' or 'star of the sea' " (129). McCarthy continues, "My second name, Therese, could dedicate me either to Saint Theresa [of Avila] or the saint called the Little Flower, Soer Thérèse of Lisieux, on whom God was supposed to

have descended in the form of a shower of roses” (130). Like the doctors of the Church, St. Teresa of Avila and St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the third Teresa, Mary McCarthy’s Jewish contemporary, also was quite intelligent and a Carmelite nun.

For both Jews and Catholics, names are important. What one is called often indicates a corresponding calling. A name’s meaning often translates into meaningfulness in life, since a name is bound to one’s vocation—the Divine Mystery’s particular calling in a person’s life. In *Woman*, Stein speaks a great deal about the concept of individuality and personhood. Referring to what happens to be both McCarthy’s first and second names, Stein says:

Although [Mary’s] vocation is a unique one in human history, we see time and time again throughout human history women who distinctively have a special mission to fulfill: in the Old Testament are Judith and Esther who are viewed as prefigurements of **Mary**; to name only a few in the history of the Church whose efficacy was particularly striking and removed from the usual life of woman, we have for example Catherine of Siena, Joan of Arc, and the great St. **Teresa**. (201, emphasis added)

Later in *Woman*, Stein uses St. Thérèse of Lisieux to illustrate the mystery by which we co-create with the Divine Mystery: “The life of little Thérèse of Lisieux can be an introduction into the closed garden of Carmel, an initiation into the mysteries of sacrifice and of the work of co-redemption accomplished through the vicarious suffering of expiation” (249). McCarthy’s first name, which does indeed mean “bitter” from the Hebrew, and “Star of the Sea” from the Latin, could have pointed her to the high calling “of the work of co-redemption” in Christ through the cross. She would have had the two doctors of the Church, St. Theresa and St. Thérèse of Lisieux—and St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross—as shining examples to light her way, as well.

There is not only a great continuity between Judaism and Catholicism, in general, but also a clear resemblance between American-Jewish Literature and American-Catholic Literature. In the Introduction to *A Malamud Reader*, Philip Rahv points to the theme of suffering as a distinguishing characteristic of Jewish literature. Rahv was McCarthy's lover, with whom she had a son, Reuel Wilson, and whom she left for her second of four husbands, the writer and critic Edmund Wilson. Rahv continues, "The feeling for human suffering is of course far from being an exclusively 'Jewish' quality. It figures even more prominently in Dostoevsky" (x). Commenting specifically on the work of the American-Jewish novelist, Bernard Malamud, in the late sixties, Rahv observes: "Generally speaking, he has been assimilated all too readily to the crowd of American-Jewish writers who have lately made their way into print" (vii). Indeed, the American-Jewish presence was looming large at the time at least three of our four novels were published. For instance, Malamud's *Magic Barrel* won the National Book Award in 1959 and Philip Roth's *Goodbye, Columbus* in 1960—two years before Percy's *Moviegoer* won it.²⁵ Rahv says, "The homogenization resulting from speaking of them as if they comprised some kind of literary faction or school is bad critical practice" (vii). This kind of homogenization of course again applies to more than to just the Jews. Rahv says that it is "based on simplistic assumptions concerning the literary process as a whole as well as the nature of American Jewry, which, all appearances to the contrary, is very far from constituting a unitary group in its cultural manifestations" (vii). Critics might do well to

²⁵ O'Connor enjoyed Malamud's work. She wrote to Fr. J. H. McCown about *The Magic Barrel*: "The stories deal with Jews and they are the real thing. Really spiritual and very funny. Somebody was telling me yesterday that the reason Jews are ahead of Catholics is very simple: they have more brains. I believe it" (HB 288).

apply Rhav's admonition to their work with Catholic writers. Judaism is unique insofar as it is both a religion and an ethnicity; whereas, anyone can become a Catholic and write literature in accordance with or in opposition to how the Catholic Church understands reality. At the same time, the Catholic understanding of baptism is that it is one's birth into the family of God; thus, the unbelieving McCarthy remains both Jewish and Catholic.

Memories is, especially in its enquiry into suffering and theodicy, both a Jewish and a Catholic novel, but as I mentioned in the dissertation's introduction, it seems to stand apart from the other three novels in this study because it is not a "Southern Gothic" novel. The fact that *Memories* is both Jewish and Catholic, however, provides somewhat of a key to its connection to the Southern Gothic genre. After all, there are not many things more "gothic" than a Catholic girls' school. Although *Memories* cannot be considered a Southern Gothic novel in the same way *Wise Blood*, *The Moviegoer*, and *Child of God* are, it can be seen as such insofar as it continues, in some fashion, certain tropes of the European Gothic, after which the Southern Gothic is named. In some ways, it is even more like the European Gothic than our so-called Southern Gothic novels. Shelley's first publication, the Gothic novel, *Zastrozzi*, did the same thing for Shelley as *Memories* did for McCarthy—namely, it was an opportunity for him to celebrate his atheism. Throughout *Memories*, McCarthy is explaining away the supernatural and replacing Catholic "superstitions" with her enlightened atheism. And let us not forget the European trope of the "Wandering Jew." The gothic novel, *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams*, by the atheist William Godwin, does not have a literal

wandering Jew in it, but Caleb is like one in all of his wretched wandering. Caleb's darkly romantic "paroxysms of fear" might be called "existential outbursts" in modern parlance. Caleb disguises himself as a Jew to escape the tyrannical Falkland, who is supposed to represent a tyrannical God. Mary McCarthy, like a twentieth-century Caleb Williams, is a "wandering Jew" in her own right.

Many Southern Gothic writers, such as O'Connor, preferred not to be considered as such. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor writes that "no one has ever made plain just what the Southern school is or which writers belong to it" and continues, "the term [often] conjures up an image of Gothic monstrosities and the idea of a preoccupation with everything deformed and grotesque" (MM 28). O'Connor concludes, "Most of us are considered, I believe, to be unhappy combinations of Poe and Erskine Caldwell" (28). O'Connor seems to suggest that the Southern Gothic writer, herself, is seen as a kind of "freak." She is not denying the influence of the European Gothic altogether, but she is advocating that Southern Gothic is something different, something more. According to O'Connor's assessment, even the dark romanticism of European Gothic literature is, in a sense, a kind of "realism." The "ultimate reaches of reality" for Romanticism, in a way, harmonizes with the romantic notion of the sublime, and it is this sublimity that the Jewish and Catholic Mary McCarthy seeks, even if she never finds it. Insofar as this search is atheistic, it is a longing without an end, and although this nostalgia lacks fulfillment and beauty in an ultimate sense, it tends toward the splendor of truth, whether McCarthy wills it to or not.

This universal human longing is why the Jewish and Catholic *Memories* ends so memorably with McCarthy's Jewish grandmother, Augusta Morgenstern Preston, searching for her "whatchamacallit" and begging for McCarthy's intercession in the matter.²⁶ In *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*, Brant Pitre writes extensively about the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist. In opposition to McCarthy's condescending notion that the Eucharist is a "pretty good symbol," Pitre argues, like O'Connor, that the Eucharist is the Divine Mystery's loving—and very real—condescension to his people. Pitre says that the Eucharist is prefigured in the manna bread described in Exodus—the "miraculous 'bread from heaven,' given directly by God to his people for them to eat" (81, emphasis in original). According to Pitre, many modern skeptics, in a rather gothic mode of explaining away the supernatural, have mistakenly identified "the manna with a natural substance secreted by the tamarisk plant or by one of the desert insects that feeds on its leaves" (81). Pitre clarifies: "The whole point of the story is that the Israelites 'did not know what it was.' That's why they called it manna, from the Hebrew meaning 'What is it?' (*man hu*)" (82). The Eucharist is for Catholics the primary means by which we conform our lives to the Divine Mystery, so that we are not only created in his image but also choose to live in his likeness. The alternative is to seek futilely for our "whatchamacallits"—to gaze into our hand mirrors,

²⁶ Mary McCarthy, hereby, assumes the role of Mary, Queen of Heaven and "Queen Mother." According to the Catholic Church, Mary is the fulfillment of the Jewish *Gebirah*, or "Great Lady," whose primary role was that of intercessor for the people to the King, e.g. Bathsheba was the Queen Mother when Solomon was King of Israel (cf. I Kings 2:19). As Pope Pius XII says in the encyclical, *Ad Caeli Reginam*: "The hope placed in the Mother of the Divine King, Jesus Christ, has never failed" (1). McCarthy's intercessory role for her grandmother proves ineffective at the end of *Memories*, metaphorically suggesting a similar despair in *Gebirah*'s intercession for the Jews.

and desperately try to form the Divine Mystery in our own images, which is, for the practicing Catholic like O'Connor, a kind of moral senility.

McCarthy's hubris is expressed in *Memories* time and time again, not because she is unintelligent, but because she persists in choosing to be unintelligible. She will not be understood and loved because in the final analysis, her worldview does not allow for such communion. Thus, in a fitting though false close to her memoir, she comes running to her grandmother's side, whose "unearthly" scream was "neither animal nor human, and it did not stop" (242). McCarthy embraces her grandmother, and concerning this attempt at consolation says, "It was the first time we had ever been close to each other" (243). She says, "The intellectual part of my mind was aware that some sort of revelation had taken place—of the nature of Jewish family feeling, possibly" (243). McCarthy's failure to recognize her Catholic faith as the fulfillment of her Jewish heritage, however, leaves McCarthy feeling like an "utter outsider." She says, "It seemed clear to me that night, as I sat stroking her hair, that she had never really cared for anyone but her sister; that was her secret" (243). Figuratively speaking, such is the predicament and burden of every modern person—each of us desperately desires to love and to be loved but so few of us can do or be either. McCarthy's natural pride becomes hubris, however, when she decides that such moral and mental senility is a simple and unavoidable "fact." According to St. Paul, on the contrary, the Divine Mystery "destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:5). McCarthy was not left an orphan, even though she consistently refuses in *Memories* to remember the true meaning and purpose of her Catholic girlhood.

Interchapter Two: Russian Literature as a Model

Both Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and Pope Francis have a great love for Dostoevsky and refer to him often in their work as a purveyor of truth and mystery. Pope Benedict alludes to *The Brothers Karamazov* in the encyclical *Spe Salvi* (L. Saved in Hope) to help explain the Catholic Church's belief concerning sin and grace (cf. 44). Pope Francis says the following in his first encyclical *Lumen Fidei* (L. The Light of Faith), written in conjunction with Benedict:

In Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, Prince Myshkin sees a painting by Hans Holbein the Younger depicting Christ dead in the tomb and says: 'Looking at that painting might cause one to lose his faith.' [Part II, IV] The painting is a gruesome portrayal of the destructive effects of death on Christ's body. Yet it is precisely in contemplating Jesus' death that faith grows stronger and receives a dazzling light; then it is revealed as faith in Christ's steadfast love for us, a love capable of embracing death to bring us salvation. This love, which did not recoil before death in order to show its depth, is something I can believe in; Christ's total self-gift overcomes every suspicion and enables me to entrust myself to him completely. (16)

O'Connor believed that Russian novelists, and Fyodor Dostoevsky in particular, were adept at probing what she called the "ultimate reaches of reality." Her indebtedness to Dostoevsky is probably most clearly seen in her short story, "Parker's Back," in which the protagonist has a rendition of the 6th Century Byzantine icon, Christ Pantocrator, tattooed on his back. Catholics and non-Catholics alike have acclaimed Dostoevsky's genius. Of the latter category, Freud, for instance, said that Dostoevsky was perhaps the greatest novelist of all-time. Although in "Dostoevsky and Parricide" Freud accuses Dostoevsky of being unutterably perverse, Freud also says with respect to Dostoevsky's literary work, "Dostoevsky's place is not far behind Shakespeare. *The Brothers Karamazov* is the most magnificent novel ever written; the episode of the Grand

Inquisitor, one of the peaks in the literature of the world, can hardly be valued too highly” (98). The fact that both Freud and Pope Francis sing such high praises of this Russian novelist, or at least of his creative imagination, is a testament to Mikhail Bakhtin’s analysis of Dostoevsky as a master of the polyphonic.

American authors, especially in the South, are particularly influenced by Dostoevsky’s carnivalesque and grotesque realism. The author of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers, posited almost a century ago that Southern writers, such as William Faulkner, are indebted to Russian writers, such as Dostoevsky. A more recent observer of McCullers’s insight concerning the kinship between Russian and Southern grotesque realism is Benjamin Saxton, whose 2012 dissertation is entitled *Grotesque Subjects: Dostoevsky and Modern Southern Fiction, 1930-1960*. In “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature,” McCullers describes the shared technique as a “bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail” (206). I want to suggest that the grotesque elements that McCullers sees in Russian writers has more to do with Christian realism, upon which O’Connor insists; nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Russian writers, primarily Dostoevsky, take part in these finally Catholic sensibilities, although Dostoevsky would have hated to know that he shared so much in common with Catholicism. What McCullers describes as materialism is, for both Catholics and Orthodox, the contemplation of Word and Sacrament.

Notwithstanding the value of McCuller's insight that "Southern Gothic" Literature is in many ways more like nineteenth century Russian Realism than European Gothic, McCullers at the same time contributes to the modernistic trend of undermining and even eliminating the spiritual dimensions of both Russian Realism and the Southern Gothic, which in turn robs them to a certain extent of their depth. In "A Christian Revolution in Russian Literary Criticism," the brilliant scholar of Russian Literature Victor Terras says, "It is unexpected to see how little attention critics and historians have paid to the role of Russian Orthodoxy in the creation and reception of Russian literature" (769). A similar statement might be said of the role of Catholicism in the creation and reception of American literature, especially after critics recognize Protestantism's roots in Catholicism. Terras points out that Dostoevsky and Apollon Grigoriev were probably the most prominent literary authors in the nineteenth century with "a distinctly religious vision" (769). Terras refers to the idea of *sobornost*, which he says is "a community spirit which lets Russians gather freely in Christian love and faith" and goes on to explain certain Orthodox values, such as grace and Christian repentance, that are so drastically opposed to "Western self-willed individualism" (769).²⁷

Terras identifies Vladimir Zakharov as coining "the term 'Christian realism,' which [Zakharov] considers synonymous with Dostoevsky's 'realism in a higher sense'" (769). Terras discusses how Zakharov reflects upon a number of Russian writers—

²⁷ Terras's Dostoevskian criticism is part of a larger critical movement, which has been called "theophanic criticism," particularly popular among scholars of Russian Literature. Susan McReynold, in her introduction to the 2009 volume of *Dostoevsky Studies*, refers to the idea of "theophanic criticism" as a critical mode that "presents religious propositions found in literature as objective truth" (6). The various contributors to the journal discuss the pros and cons of this emerging approach with respect to Dostoevsky.

Pushkin, Gogol, and Tolstoy—but according to Zakharov, Dostoevsky remains the most prominent figure of “Christian Realism.” Terras concludes his essay with an appreciation for Zakharov’s contributions, but distances himself from Zakharov’s Russian Christianity. Terras says, “As for Christian realism, this reader [Terras] holds the opinion that the greatness of Gogol and Dostoevsky is not a function of either their Christianity or their Russianness” (775). Moreover, although Terras says that Zakharov is in 2001 the first to use the term “Christian realism,” O’Connor used this very phrase to describe her own writing in a letter to Betty Hester: “I am mighty tired of reading reviews that call ‘A Good Man’ brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than *Christian realism*” (HB 90, emphasis added).²⁸ In opposition to Terras’s opinion that Dostoevsky’s greatness did not have to do with his Christianity, Catholic literary theory recognizes the Catholic writer’s kinship with Dostoevsky precisely in terms of fidelity to Christ and the objective nature of the reality he has created. Both Dostoevsky and O’Connor share in this “Christian realism.”

Understanding Dostoevsky’s fiction as eliciting creative powers not only in the writer but also in the reader is a fitting model for Catholic fiction, as well. In “Reading and Incarnation in Dostoevsky,” Eric Ziolkowski recognizes that work has been done on the significance of intertextual references that Dostoevsky employs in his novels, such as Victor Terras’s commentary on *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ziolkowski, however, observes

²⁸ George Weigel notes, “Fifteen years after [O’Connor’s] death, her friend Sally Fitzgerald edited and published a collection of her letters under the title, *The Habit of Being*. And the world discovered a new Flannery O’Connor—a gifted Catholic apologist and razor-sharp analysis of the “Catholic difference” in its sometimes challenging, sometimes enthusiastic, and always bracing encounter with modern culture” (11).

that further study in this area of intertextuality is needed: “A heightened awareness of the myriad citations in Dostoevsky’s fiction will not alone lead to a full comprehension of his narrative employment of literature, hagiography [lives of the saints] and the Bible or the role such citations play in his portrayal of characters” (156). Ziolkowski suggests a specific question to open the reader to a deeper level of interpreting such intertextuality in Dostoevsky, namely, “What is the significance of reading as an act in Dostoevsky’s fiction?” (157). Drawing from criticism on Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*, Ziolkowski proposes what he calls “the phenomenon of literary incarnation” as the means by which Dostoevsky calls his characters “to be that which they are” (162).

O’Connor describes this phenomenon of literary incarnation in her essays and performs it in her art. In “The Catholic Novelist is the Protestant South,” she says, “I think that Catholic novelists in the future will be able to reinforce the vital strength of Southern literature” (209). Implicitly confirming the likeness that exists between Dostoevsky’s writing and her own, O’Connor specifies that Catholic novelists share, or ought to share, the following “beliefs and qualities” with Southern writers: “a distrust of the abstract, a sense of human dependence on the grace of God, and a knowledge that evil is not simply a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be endured” (209). According to Ziolkowski, this “literary incarnation” that occurs in Dostoevsky’s characters reflects or in some way parodies the Incarnation of the Divine Mystery, “The Word made Flesh,” which is, therefore, the primary text from which Dostoevsky’s fiction ultimately derives. Ziolkowski’s notion of “literary incarnation” is shared in the Catholic tradition, even as Catholics and Orthodox were in communion with one another for at least the first

millennium A.D. St. Athanasius, who is considered by both Catholics and Orthodox as a Father of the Church, says, “For the Son of God became man so that we might become God” (54). “Literary incarnation” is for both reader and writer alike.

Chapter Four: Walker Percy and Leisure in *The Moviegoer*

“What a piece of work is man, how noble in reason, how / infinite in faculties, in form and moving how express and / admirable, in action how like an angel, in apprehension how like / a god! The beauty of the world, the paragon of animals—and yet, / to me, what is this quintessence of dust?”

~Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene 2, lines 303-307

Walker Percy creates his characters out of a profoundly Catholic understanding of reality, Lenten preoccupations et al. The ancient Catholic understanding, which adumbrates the conditional existentialism of the twentieth century, is founded upon a paradoxical belief—that Jesus Christ is the fullness of truth, yet at the same time, the Divine Mystery manifests himself in many and varied ways through all of his creation, especially through human beings. With respect to this paradox, the Catechism says, “God grants his creatures not only their existence, but also the dignity of acting on their own, of being causes and principles for each other, and thus of co-operating in the accomplishment of his plan” (306). This mutual creativity is not extraneous but essential to Catholic literary theory: “The truth that God is at work in all the actions of his creatures is inseparable from faith in God the Creator” (CCC 308). Drawing from this

crucial paradox, the Catholic Church invites her members to seek knowledge and experience of persons and cultures in order to know and make known Christ's love, even if—or rather, especially if—those persons and peoples do not identify as Christian. Walker Percy's fictional creation, such as Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, is the literary fruit of Percy's artistic gifts and this ecclesial wisdom.

The Catholic monition to reach out to and engage every sector of society, however, is naturally more evident as the *raison d'être* of Percy's essays. Percy says that the goal of his book of essays, *The Message in the Bottle*, is twofold. He explains that *The Message* is about “man's strange behavior and man's strange gift of language, and about how understanding the latter might help in understanding the former” (9). The language and behavior of human beings is and has always been, of course, the stuff of philosophy and literature, but Percy proposes that he wants to do something new. He says that he is not concerned with writing more treatises on behaviorism because “the old modern age has ended and man has not the beginning of an understanding of himself in the new age because the old theories don't work any more” (9). Thus, Percy attempts to “sketch the beginning of a theory of man for a new age” (10). Percy is not concerned with simply repeating modernity's project (e.g. Ezra Pound's proclamation: “Make it new!”); rather, Percy's plan conforms to the Catholic Church's call for a “New Evangelization.”²⁹

²⁹ Percy published *The Moviegoer* in 1961, the year before Pope St. John the XXIII called the Second Vatican Council to help Catholics share the gospel with the modern world more effectively. Pope St. John Paul II, who canonized John XXIII, says in the encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* that a “new evangelization” or a “re-evangelization” is needed, in particular, “where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel” (sec. 33). Such is Binx Bolling's milieu, and ours.

Percy's fiction is consistent with the goals of his essay writing, and we will explore *The Moviegoer* using Percy's own Catholic literary theory as a way toward self-knowledge and identity.

To the question, "Why are you Catholic?" Percy responds quite simply: "I believe that what the Catholic Church proposes is true" (*Signposts* 304). Percy, as a practicing Catholic, believes that the Catholic Church is the sacrament of salvation; he also believes with the Church that she exists for the life of the world. Since the Church is, in a sense, both inclusive and exclusive, Percy says that he also "usually" responds to the question, "Why are you Catholic?" with "What else is there?" (307). He adds, "I justify this smart-mouthed answer when I sense that the question is, as it usually is, a smart-mouthed question" (307). Notwithstanding certain idiosyncrasies of Percy's way of evangelization, there is no doubt that Percy seeks to evangelize as the Church invites and commands him to do. In *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, Pope Benedict XVI uses a metaphor he found in the writings of the Eastern Church Father, St. Basil the Great, to describe this fecundity of the Divine Mystery's relationship with the world. Commenting on Isaiah 9:10, St. Basil writes:

The sycamore is a tree that bears very plentiful fruit. But it is tasteless unless one carefully slits it and allows its sap to run out, whereby it becomes flavorful. That is why, we believe, the sycamore is a symbol for the pagan world: it offers a surplus, yet at the same time it is insipid. This comes from living according to pagan customs. When one manages to slit them by means of the Logos [Christ], it [the pagan world] is transformed, becomes tasty and useful. (qtd. in Ratzinger 34)

Both O'Connor and Percy embody this dynamic in their literature. They humbly proclaim the Divine Mystery's word through their art, and with the reluctant prophet, Amos, they say: "I am no prophet, nor a prophet's son; but I am a herdsman, and a dresser of

sycamore trees” (Amos 7:14). Like Zacchaeus, who “climbed a sycamore tree” to see Jesus (Luke 19:4), Percy was a convert to Catholicism in his adulthood. He explores his relationship to Christ in both a philosophical and personal way through the literary influence of his “Uncle” Will Percy,³⁰ who unlike Walker, was raised Catholic and converted to atheism rather than the other way around. It is not without reason that *The Moviegoer*’s dedication page reads “In Gratitude to W.A.P.,” William Alexander Percy.

The Existential Atheism of Uncle Will and Aunt Emily

Walker Percy provides in *The Moviegoer* a literary doppelgänger of his Uncle William, who acted as a father to Walker after the suicide of Walker’s father and the death of his mother. In *The Comedy of Redemption*, Ralph C. Wood recognizes William Percy as the progenitor of Bolling’s Aunt Emily, whom the first-person narrator, Bolling, introduces thus: “My aunt likes to say she is an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice” (23). Later, Aunt Emily speaks some of the most memorable, as well as existentially atheistic, words of the novel:

I don’t quite know what we are doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe it with every fiber of my being. A man must live by his own lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man.
(54)

Aunt Emily belies her “Episcopalian emotions” and reveals her atheistic existentialism by maintaining that *doing* precedes *being* and that man exists only insofar as he performs.

³⁰ Walker’s much older “Uncle” Will, who adopted Walker when he was fourteen, was actually his first cousin.

William Percy's memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*, sheds more light on Aunt Emily's work-as-worth ethos. Uncle Will relates in his memoir having a similar existential crisis as Bolling has, and he expresses a similar sentiment as Bolling's Aunt Emily does in *The Moviegoer*. William falls away from his Catholic faith in college and travels for a year. Before William enters Harvard Law School, his father offers to help him in any profession that he chooses but insists that he make his own way in the world. William cannot find any useful occupation—"a combination sufficient to fling one tail-spinning into the deepest inferiority complex" (*Lanterns* 113). In the midst of his existential crisis, William proclaims, "All along of course I had a sneaking persistent desire to write, but I realized I had nothing to write about, being ignorant of man and of his home, this dark sphere, and even of that palpitating speck, myself" (114). Whether the world is "this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe," according to Aunt Emily, or simply "this dark sphere," according to Uncle William, man is essentially unknown and unloved. Uncle Will and Aunt Emily insist that man must enlighten himself with his own lights. From where he received such lights, he knows not. He is nothing and will return to it insofar as nothingness is his origin.

Sartre's existentialism espouses this notion of reality in treatise form in his lengthy and complex work *Being and Nothingness*, in which he conflates the possibility for man to propose the Divine Mystery's non-existence with the actuality of his non-existence. He prescind from the proposed reality of the Divine Mystery's existence to focus on humanity's existence even to the exclusion of the Divine Mystery's. In *Literary and Philosophical Essays*, Sartre extends this logic to the world of literature. Sartre

declares, “Fictional beings have their laws, the most rigorous of which is the following: the novelist may be either their witness or their accomplice, but never both at the same time” (17). This fictional law mimics the reality of Sartre’s atheism, which says that divine assistance is unavailable in direct proportion to divine authority. An author who creates her literary offspring to be infinitely less than herself has already betrayed them in the very act of creation. How can she empathize with those whom she has birthed to be her slaves?

Walker Percy sees Sartre’s literary doctrine as deriving from his anti-theological doctrine that the Divine Mystery, if he exists, is either deistic, i.e. merely an “indifferent observer,” or tyrannical, i.e. merely an “enforcer.” Percy suggests that Sartre’s “God-problem” might spring from Sartre’s fame in France as “a kind of literary-political pope, a savant, an academician, the very sort of person Sartre made fun of in *Nausea*” (Self-Interview 76). Catholic literary theory turns Sartre’s literary law on its head and argues that the novelist must be *both* a witness *and* an accomplice, or rather an aid, to his fictional creation. According to this pre-modernistic understanding of the Divine Mystery, in whose pattern the artist analogously creates, the Divine Mystery accomplishes the good in his “protagonists,” but he also permits the evil they commit against him and one another precisely because he loves them enough to keep them free. Whereas Sartre concludes his essay, “God is not an artist” (25), Percy says otherwise.

The Catholic novelist portrays in his fiction the mystery of sin, which consists in that, despite its ugliness, it remains alluring. It is simultaneously appealing and appalling. Even as Bolling senses that his Aunt Emily’s anti-philosophy—that man must live “by

his own lights”—is a woefully inadequate foundation for his existence, Bolling still seeks fulfillment in it. He hopes beyond hope that the belief in his no-thing-ness is something and something worth believing in.³¹ Percy does not deny the reality of atheism. He readily admits that one may conceive that the Divine Mystery does not exist; furthermore, he artfully depicts its seductive power. When Aunt Emily pronounces her Sartrean exhortations, Bolling says, “My neck begins to prickle with a dreadful-but-not-unpleasant eschatological prickling” (50). As Oscar Wilde once quipped, the only way to get rid of temptation, it seems, is to give into it. To be precise, it is Wilde’s wanton character, Lord Henry Wotton, in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* who instructs Dorian: “The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself” (14). Wilde’s Wotton and Gray, created at the end of the nineteenth century, are harbingers of countless like-minded characters in the novels of the twentieth, including Aunt Emily and, to a certain extent, her protégé, Bolling.

The existentialist notion that man’s freedom and the Divine Mystery’s freedom are mutually exclusive did not originate, although it perhaps flowered, in the twentieth century. The European Enlightenment was, in a sense, founded upon this idea. John Locke, for instance, argues that since the Divine Mystery created man without his consent, then it follows that man cannot be called free. This “enlightened” view of freedom confuses freedom with license or licentiousness. Under the guise of scientific

³¹ Drawing from Augustine, Aquinas teaches this aspect of the *mysterium iniquitatis*: “Non-being is desirable, not of itself, but relatively—i.e., inasmuch as the removal of an evil, which is removed by non-being, is desirable” (ST Q.5 A. 2). Accordingly, one is able to develop, in a way, a real *love* for evil—to avoid the emptiness of evil by enjoying the evil, itself.

knowledge, Locke rejects the Divine Mystery. Under the semblance of mystical knowledge, Sartre does the same. The protagonist of Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), Dr. Tom More, observes, "Was it not John Locke who said that the mark of genius is the ability to discern not this thing or that thing but rather the connection between the two?" (26).³² In Percy's sequel *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), Dr. Tom More repeats his observation about Locke: "A great scientist once said that genius consists not in making great discoveries but in seeing the connection between small discoveries" (3). *The Moviegoer* does not explicitly acknowledge the enlightenment philosopher's insight about greatness hidden in small "connections," but it implies it through Bolling's existential quest for meaning. Locke's innovation, like Francis Bacon's "great instauration," can be seen as a forerunner of Uncle Will's and Aunt Emily's atheism or a catalyst for Bolling's conversion, or rather re-version, to the Catholic faith. Either way, Bolling cannot escape his Catholicism altogether.

Bolling's Impoverished Catholicism

Bolling explains that his Catholicism comes to him via his mother, whom his "aunt's circle" call a "devout Catholic." He denies that his mother is devout, only "practicing," and concludes: "This accounts for the fact that I am, nominally at least, also a Catholic" (48). Bolling is true to his word with respect to the "nominal" nature of his Catholicism. He is Catholic in name but not in action. He recognizes that he loves in word but not in deed. Indeed, he readily admits, "I go to bed cozy and dry in the storm,

³² Dr. Tom More comically parodies St. Thomas More, the Catholic lawyer and Renaissance philosopher whom King Henry VIII executed for opposing his divorce to Catherine of Aragon and subsequent marriage to Anne Boleyn. The name is also a pun on the good doctor's personal longing and modernity's often unexpressed yearning for *more*.

snug as a larva in a cocoon, wrapped safe and warm in loving Christian kindness” (108). Bolling’s blanket of “loving Christian kindness,” however, has nothing whatsoever to do with Christ. Rather, as Bolling explains, “Monks have their compline, I have This I Believe” (108). *This I Believe* was a 1950s radio program, and Bolling identifies a single characteristic that all the people on it share—their niceness: “Their lives are triumphs of niceness. They like everyone with the warmest and most generous of feelings” (108). Bolling emphasizes that these are not unintelligent people. In fact, they are paragons of niceness and intelligence. He says, “I doubt if any other country or time in history has produced such thoughtful and high-minded people, especially the women” (108). Despite his tongue in cheek admiration of the people of *This I Believe*, Bolling feels that he has a clear devotion to them. He wants to like them, to be liked by them, and to be like them, just as he wants to be rid of his haunting Catholic faith. Although he longs for authentic communion, he settles for empty sentimentality: “I switch off my radio and lie in bed with a pleasant tingling sensation in the groin, a tingling for Sharon and for all my fellow Americans” (110). The superficiality that *This I Believe* recommends is not so demanding, or rewarding, as the genuine love that Bolling’s Catholic faith requires and inspires.

Percy was fond of poking fun at what he perceived as modern man’s woefully inadequate psychologizing of sin in both his fiction and his essays. He was distraught by the propensity of modern literature, more often than not, to propound the *mysterium iniquitatum* as a mere psychological state of ambivalence, wherein one must strive to “get over” his repulsion to sin in order to better enjoy it. Percy was not the only novelist in the

twentieth century writing about sin as sin. *The Screwtape Letters* by C. S. Lewis as a relatively rare work of modern fiction that thoroughly retains the pre-modern understanding of sin. The Catholic literary scholar, Thomas Howard, characterizes *The Screwtape Letters* as “a brilliant transformation of an ancient literary form—the epistle—into a modern exploration of good and evil” (335). He says, “*Screwtape* is unabashedly hortatory—a work that earnestly advises and warns its readers” (335). Howard notes that this literary form, with all its exhortations and explicit encouragements against sinful behavior, does not strike many modern readers as particularly appealing. He says we must look back centuries to “the cautionary tales, dream visions, and morality plays in which virtue, sin, judgment, heaven, and hell are addressed in highly explicit but highly imaginative ways” (335). The directness of Lewis’s *Screwtape* can help to reveal the more hidden, and thus more stylistically modern, moral message of Percy’s *Moviegoer*. The nearly contemporary artists and their works are similarly concerned with sin and evil, but while Lewis adopts the ancient mode of literary instruction, Percy takes on the guise of modernistic ambiguity.

Bolling’s “love” of his fellow Americans is the same kind of love that *Screwtape* tells Wormwood to use against the young English man. *Screwtape* says, “You must bring him to a condition in which he can practice self-examination for an hour without discovering any of those facts about himself which are perfectly clear to anyone who has ever lived in the same house with him or worked in the same office” (12). *Screwtape* reminds Wormwood that if the man is constantly concerned for and praying for some hazy *idea* of his mother, for instance, then the man will fail to care for his *actual* mother.

Bolling struggles with the slothfulness of heart that facilitates a kind of pseudo-spiritual compassion to take the place of real compassion, or more troubling, Bolling sometimes does *not* struggle against this slothfulness that is so common to the modern man. The ordinary, everyday, but real opportunity for love—loving his mother, his brother, or Kate, for instance—is replaced by a complacent nostalgia to belong, an empty sentiment of believing in, as so many others with him, in nothing in particular.

The Russian Orthodox tradition teaches that sloth or acedia, rather than pride, is the root of all sin. This theological approach does not conflict with the Catholic faith, since the Western and Eastern traditions come together, insofar as both pride and sloth have to do with putting something other than the Divine Mystery before himself. According to both traditions, trusting in something *before* the Divine Mystery is tantamount to not trusting in him at all. Both pride and sloth express a lack of priorities—when one makes himself or another into a god in place of the Divine Mystery. Bolling effectively achieves this displacement with movies among other things. The theater is accorded the reverence of a church: “Kate gives me a look—it is understood that we do not speak during the movie” (63). Many critics, including Paul Elie, the author of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, have recognized Bolling’s exchange of the movie theater for the church. The Catholic Church includes pride and sloth along with avarice, envy, wrath, lust, and gluttony as “capital” sins, called so because “they engender other sins, other vices” (CCC 1866). Perhaps Bolling wants Sartre’s literary law that one may only observe or do to be true. He feels that if he views systemic evil—in small, usually

PG-rated doses, of course³³—he can do no wrong. Bolling’s slothfulness often invites lust, and both feed on his melancholy. When he says, “desire for her is like a sorrow in my heart,” (68) he is speaking about Sharon in this instance, but it might as well be any other sweet thing. Bolling says, “she is not really beautiful” with her “yellow” eyes and “fearful soap-clean good looks,” but her “bottom is so beautiful that once as she crossed the room to the cooler I felt my eyes smart with tears of gratitude” (65). Sharon stands in for the object of his self-gratification. She is more of an “it” than a she to Bolling, expendable and unnecessary, just as Bolling, at bottom, feels himself to be. Like all sin, Bolling’s sin is parasitic—its strength and allure derives from its apparent goodness. Catholicism teaches that the Divine Mystery creates all things good, for he is good, but sin is the action and choice to despair—to finally rest in the created rather than the Creator.

Bolling’s slothfulness is more than mere laziness. He admits as much to his mother: “It is not laziness, Mother. Partly but not all” (157). In some ways, he is overworked and chooses to overwork. Like Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*, he thinks and thinks at the expense of partaking in true leisure. Bolling uses Sunday afternoon to epitomize the malaise that he feels: “On its way home, the MG becomes infested with malaise. It is not unexpected, since Sunday afternoon is always the worst time for malaise” (166). On Sunday, the Lord’s Day, he does not have proper leisure. Neglecting to dedicate the week to the Divine Mystery, he transgresses the fourth

³³ The Motion Picture Association of America film-rating system began in 1968, but despite the anachronism, most of the films alluded to in *The Moviegoer*, such as Frank Capra’s *It Happened One Night* (70) or *The Young Philadelphians* (211) with Paul Newman and Barbara Rush seem like they would probably be PG today.

commandment (cf. Exod. 20:8) to keep holy the Christian Sabbath.³⁴ Bolling replaces the Divine Mystery with no-thing. The rest of the week follows this pattern of lack of rest. Bolling says, “During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. I lived in my room as an Anyone living Anywhere and read fundamental books and only for diversion took walks around the neighborhood and saw an occasional movie” (69). Some of the “fundamental books” that Bolling reads are Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, “the novel of novels;” *A Study of History*, the massive twelve volume history by Arnold J. Toynbee; Erwin Shroedinger’s science book *What is Life*; and *The Universe as I See It* by Albert Einstein. Studying these books is not easy. Bolling is “working hard,” but his work is akin to Raskolnikov’s “work”—the work of thinking.³⁵

³⁴ The fourth commandment refers to the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday, the seventh day of creation, upon which the Divine Mystery rested from his work of creation. Christianity sees Sunday as the New Sabbath, since Christ rose from the dead on Sunday and thus re-created the universe through the work of redemption.

³⁵ In my master’s thesis, “Semiotics and Christian Discipleship in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *The Cost of Discipleship* and Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*,” I compare Raskolnikov’s thinking to that of Antoine Roquentin, the protagonist of Sartre’s novel, *Nausea*. The following description of the crux of Raskolnikov’s slothfulness seems to apply just as well to both Roquentin and Bolling: “The question is not *whether* one must choose, for even in thinking that one is not choosing, one is choosing—the question is simply *what* one is choosing. This ontological situation seems purely negative in the sense that one does not choose to be born and then is forced to choose thereafter. There is no time or place when or where one is not choosing. Even [Raskolnikov’s] *ennui* is a choice” (28). Percy acknowledges that Sartre’s atheism is, in a way, religious. He says, “[Sartre’s] atheism is ‘religious’ in the sense intended here: that the novelist betrays a passionate conviction, the world, and man’s obligation in the world” (*Message* 103). Dostoevsky’s Raskolnikov, Percy’s Bolling, and Sartre’s Roquentin are all “religious” characters insofar as they share in this fundamental human characteristic: they are seeking their Maker and in so doing, they are at war within themselves.

The Catholic literary scholar, Ben Alexander, calls attention to the early insight by O'Connor and Percy's Catholic mentor, Caroline Gordon, who said that O'Connor and Percy are literary cousins of Dostoevsky—more than Faulkner, whose humanism according to Gordon is a rather different type. In the unpublished Flannery O'Connor book of letters, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, Alexander says:

When Robert Fitzgerald in 1951 sent Caroline Gordon the manuscript of *Wise Blood*, she was already tutoring an obscure, physician-turned-novelist, Walker Percy. She soon concluded both O'Connor and Percy had great promise—and even then recognized the potential of their later stature and influence. (One 1)

With Gordon's comparison of the two authors to Dostoevsky, Alexander quotes Gordon as saying that Dostoevsky “rests squarely on the Christian myth, the responsibility for which rests on God. He did not have to create a new heaven and earth, as some secular writers seem to feel called on to do” (One 2). In a letter to Brainard Cheney, Gordon predicts a new kind of novel exemplified by those of O'Connor and Percy. Gordon says that they will be “novels written by people who are consciously rooted and grounded in the faith . . . people who don't have to spend time trying to figure out what moral order prevails in the universe and therefore have more energy for spontaneous creation” (One 2; ellipsis in orig.). Gordon was not the only one earnestly awaiting this new kind of novel.

Gordon's remarks seemed to have resonated with both authors. O'Connor, for instance, wrote to John Lynch about them. She says, “I have never had the sense that being a Catholic is a limit to the freedom of the writer, but just the reverse. Mrs. Tate told me that after she became a Catholic, she [...] didn't have to make a new universe for each

book but could take the one she found” (HB 114).³⁶ Percy is rooted in the Catholic universe when he asks, “What else is there?” Although both O’Connor and Percy recognize the great plurality of belief systems in the world, they maintain that their writing is not anti-historical but rather, in a sense, conscientiously and consistently historical. They do not pretend to create their worlds *ex nihilo*, which they understand to be the prerogative and power of the Divine Mystery alone. Instead they rely on what their Catholic faith teaches, which includes the anti-Calvinistic doctrine that the elect can be lost if they so choose. The Catechism says, “Faith is a personal act—the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself” (166). At the same time, the Church clarifies that the act of faith is not made in isolation: “The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others. Our love for Jesus and our neighbor impels us to speak to others about our faith” (166). The passing on of faith is motivated by humble gratitude for having received it.

To this end, Percy says, “As it happens, I speak in a Christian context.” Percy, however, specifies his meaning by claiming the Christian context for his own: “That is to say, I do not conceive it my vocation to preach the Christian faith in a novel, but as it happens, my world view is informed by a certain belief about man’s nature and destiny which cannot fail to be central to any novel I write” (111). Percy adds the preposition “in a novel” because every Christian’s vocation is to preach the Christian faith, but Percy is speaking about a kind of medial vocation particular to the novelist to perform the golden rule of story-telling, i.e. “show, don’t tell.” This golden rule happens to coincide with the

³⁶ O’Connor refers here to Gordon as Mrs. Tate, as she was married to the poet and fellow Catholic convert, Allen Tate.

dynamic of faith, which must culminate in love to be authentic. To further explain the meaning and reality of love, the Catechism quotes St. Therese of Lisieux, who specifies Christ as the Heart of the Body of Christ, the Church: “LOVE, IN FACT, IS THE VOCATION WHICH INCLUDES ALL OTHERS; IT’S A UNIVERSE OF ITS OWN, COMPRISING ALL TIME AND SPACE—IT’S ETERNAL!” (826, sic).

For the Catholic, even with this promise of hope, there always remains in this life the journey. St. Augustine anticipates Percy’s literature of the wayfarer and echoes Christ’s words that to love the Divine Mystery in one another and all in him is the final destination of every seeker. In *Teaching Christianity*, Augustine uses a travel metaphor to indicate the meaning of our lives. He says that we need to view our lives on earth as “not, so to say, permanently settled in, but transitory, rather, and casual, like love and delight in a road, or in vehicles, or any other tools and gadgets you like, or if you can think of any better way of putting it” (123). Augustine concludes with the aphorism: “So that we love the means by which we are being carried along, on the account of the goal to which we are being carried” (123). The Catechism often employs this very metaphor. In fact, the image of *odyssey* constitutes the heart of the Church’s theodicy: “With infinite wisdom and goodness God freely willed to create a world ‘in a state of journeying’ towards its ultimate perfection” (310). Percy’s *Moviegoer*—in this distinctly different way than most other modern works—homes in on this paradoxical “state of journeying,” and as such, it communicates not an extraneous, but rather an essential, aspect of reality.

Sloth in the Modern Age of Old Evil

Contemporary theology, as Percy suggests, often strays from the crucial problem of evil and the need to confront it, whereas, the fathers and doctors of the Church consistently recall our attention to its centrality. The Catechism goes so far as to pronounce: “There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not in part an answer to the question of evil” (309). Insofar as an author draws the eye to the reality of evil—even if he is not able or willing to show a way out of it—he is, in this sense, more religious in his writing than the writer who refuses to acknowledge its presence. It is this special characteristic of the novelist that Percy emphasizes in *Message in a Bottle* and enacts through Bolling in *The Moviegoer*: “Is it too much to say that the novelist, unlike the new theologian, is one of the few remaining witnesses to the doctrine of original sin, the imminence of catastrophe in paradise?” (*Message* 106). The Church, herself, acknowledges that to the question of evil, “no quick answer will suffice” but goes on to delineate the problem nonetheless:

Only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer to this question: the goodness of creation, the drama of sin and the patient love of God who comes to meet man by his covenants, the redemptive Incarnation of his Son, his gift of the Spirit, his gathering of the Church, the power of the sacraments and his call to a blessed life to which free creatures are invited to consent in advance, but from which, by a terrible mystery, they can also turn away in advance. (309)

This “terrible mystery” is at the heart of both O’Connor’s and Percy’s fiction. It is also there in Sartre’s, Mary McCarthy’s, and Cormac McCarthy’s, but the two practicing Catholic authors also add a dimension of redemption, and the possibility for personal salvation for their protagonists. There is no need for the authors to specify didactically in

their novels that this universal redemption and possibility of personal salvation comes from Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit—it is simply within the structure of their universe.

The redemption that is at work in O'Connor's and Percy's novels always proceeds from Christ, and the protagonists are often at war within themselves. *Wise Blood* and *The Moviegoer* both feature war veteran protagonists, both of whom have lost their way, but variously. *Wise Blood*, O'Connor's first novel, is about a World War II veteran, Hazel Motes, who as a professed atheist preaches the "Church of Christ without Christ" in some Southern town. *The Moviegoer*, Percy's first novel, is a first-person narration of a Korean War veteran, Jack ("Binx") Bolling. Both Bolling and Motes are haunted by the war within (cf. Mark 7:21-23, Luke 6:45). Bolling says, "Again this morning the dream of war, not quite a dream but the simulacrum of a dream, and again there visits the office the queasy-quince smell of 1951 and the Orient" (64). Bolling is not so much anti-religious as simply non-religious, or professes to be so, as he records his meandering through New Orleans and his seeking for he-knows-not-what. The epigraph of the novel is from Soren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: "The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair" (1). Percy delights in the irony that this Lutheran theologian instigated his conversion to Catholicism. Like Kierkegaard, he knows that despair in oneself can be the catalyst for hope in Christ, but if despair in oneself remains dormant within, it will fester into despair of everything—the only unforgivable sin. Percy's Bolling has rejected the Divine Mystery through indecision rather than outright rebellion. Distracted by women and movies, he ponders modernistic and post-modernistic

longing and lamentation to no end. The good news, however, is that the specter of Bolling's divine *telos* is only beginning to emerge at the time of the novel.

Percy became a Catholic in 1946 at the age of thirty, right around Bolling's age in the novel, but over a decade before writing the novel. In the introduction to *Walker Percy's The Moviegoer at Fifty*, Mary A. McCay and Jennifer Levasseur suggest, "Many novelists publish their most acclaimed books at the beginning of their careers, when their ultimate concerns make their public debuts" (1). This seems to be the case with Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, which won the 1962 National Book Award. McCay notes that Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road*, both of which were the authors' first novels, were also finalists that year. McCay and Levasseur observe, "*The Moviegoer*, which chronicles Binx Bolling's malaise and existential quest, was published in 1961 and remains Percy's most lauded work" (18). Bolling's malaise and an existential quest are two characteristics that seem incompatible. Is he seeking or slumbering, living or dreaming? In "From the Underground Man to Alyosha Karamazov," Jessica Hooten Wilson proposes that Bolling in *The Moviegoer* is "essentially a reimagined version of" the Underground Man in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from the Underground*. Wilson continues, "When Walker Percy published his first novel a century after Dostoevsky, he was remembering the great Russian's work and remembering (reassembling) it in the mid-century American present" (58). Although Wilson notes that Percy explicitly links the ending of *The Moviegoer* to Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, she maintains that *Notes* remains the primary Dostoevskian

influence on Percy's novel. The influence of this Russian Orthodox novelist on Percy only adds to the irony of Percy's appreciation for Kierkegaard.

Wilson's assessment of the foundational character of the Underground Man on Percy's Bolling is not surprising, since Percy also greatly admired Dostoevsky, and the Underground Man seems to hold the same position with respect to many of Dostoevsky's own characters. According to the section on Dostoevsky in *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, the critical response to *Notes* suggests that even though this work is much shorter than Dostoevsky's later and longer works, it is foundational. The concluding paragraph presents its significance in startling terms: "*Notes From the Underground* was a pivotal work for Dostoevsky for its inauguration of themes prominent in his later novels and its introduction of the acutely self-analytical, spiritually torn hero, who is a prototype for many other of his characters" (160). Perhaps even more startling, the article goes on to prophecy, "No other text by Dostoevsky has exerted more influence on twentieth-century thought or technique" (160). With respect to Percy and Bolling, at least, this statement seems certain. What Dostoevsky is doing with the Underground Man, then, informs not only what he is doing with many of his other characters, but also what other literary authors, like Percy, are doing with their characters, like Bolling, who shares in the Underground Man's "torn spirituality."

There is a Russian word that means something akin to the English words melancholy and depression but with an added transcendent element. Vladimir Nabokov describes this word, *toska/Tocka*, in the following way:

No single word in English renders all the shades of *toska*. At its deepest and most painful, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific

cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody of something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom. (141)

Binx Bolling seems rapt in and wrapped up with *toska* but the worst part of the sadness is its lack of awareness—it is a desperation verging on despair. The Underground Man, in a sense, becomes for the twentieth century literary existentialist the inversion of the disembodied medieval notion of the Divine Mystery as the “Ground of Existence.” The atheistic existentialist repudiates divine authority and calls what is absolutely illogical—the Divine Mystery’s non-existence—immanently logical. Aquinas, with the Islamic philosopher Avicenna and the Jewish philosopher Maimonides before him, refers to the Divine Mystery as the “Necessary Existent,” but the Underground Man is for the modern literary artist the utterly unnecessary underground of non-existence.

The Catholic novelist can, and Percy does, go further back in Western thought than medieval theology to understand this sensation of “Toska” in Eastern Christianity’s tradition. St. Augustine, in his *Confessions*, is famous for describing this great spiritual anguish. Once one begins to become aware of it, one sees that it is this emerging awareness that is truly the first grace and blessing. Augustine, thus, cries out to the Divine Mystery in his *Confessions*: “For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee” (I.1.1; 3). In “Our Hearts Are Restless...,” Gene Fant describes how the modern individual, however, has pared down Augustine’s prayer and lament into simply, “Our hearts are restless.” The modern man, with a false peace, rests in this restlessness. Fant says that this truncation “removes not only God, but real hope as well, leaving us with a nihilistic worldview that craves only that which allows one to

share one's misery." Fant further explains, "Faced with the choice between hopelessness and God, too often we choose despair and wallow in the torments that such a decision brings." This proclivity towards and sometimes decision for nothingness and despair instead of the Divine Mystery and hope is the strange reality that all of our authors and their protagonists are in one way or another confronting.

This human longing for the Divine Mystery, or conversely despair, is however not enough to realize either the work of universal redemption or that of individual salvation. Human longing must meet the Divine Mystery's infinitely greater longing. This personal uncertainty amidst universal hope constitutes the drama of Bolling's life. Wood recognizes that Walker Percy seeks "to create a Catholic existentialism with a firm anthropological base. He begins with the mystery of the human, and then seeks to find its suprahuman Source" (*Comedy* 152). Although Wood is correct in this assessment of Percy, Wood seems to mistakenly conclude that Percy, therefore, does not see Christ as the fullness of salvation and suggests further that to do so is specifically a Protestant, rather than Catholic, notion. Wood says, "Not for Percy the radical Protestant insistence that all true knowledge of God issues from God's own self-disclosure in Israel and Christ" (152). If Percy, however, denied that the Divine Mystery communicates himself finally and fully in Christ, as Wood suggests Percy does, then Percy would not be rejecting a "radical Protestant insistence" but rather the very heart of his Catholic and Christian faith.

The Catechism repeatedly proclaims that Jesus Christ is the "Mediator and Fullness of Revelation" and says, "In many and various ways God spoke of old to our

fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son” (Heb. 1:2). The Catechism continues, “Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father’s one, perfect and unsurpassable Word. In him he has said everything; there will be no other word than this one” (65).³⁷ So important is this aspect of the mystery of faith that the “Angelic Doctor of the Church,” St. Thomas Aquinas, chooses to begin his *Summa Theologica* answering the question of whether it is necessary to have “further doctrine besides philosophy” to be saved. Aquinas answers, “It was necessary for man’s salvation that there should be a knowledge revealed by God besides philosophical science built up by human reason” (Ia, Q. 1, A. 1). We can return to Aquinas’s predecessor, Augustine, to again express the Catholic insistence that all true knowledge of the Divine Mystery issues from his own self-disclosure in Israel and Christ, i.e. in the Old and New Testaments. Augustine’s *The Trinity*, for instance, treats this issue as its primary goal. According to Augustine, and the whole of Catholic tradition, without the Divine Mystery’s communication of himself through Christ Jesus, human beings would be utterly lost and in despair.

Wood, however, does not miss the mark concerning Percy’s interest in human speech and knowledge; he simply mistakes Percy’s humanistic tendencies as antithetical

³⁷ The Catechism employs the words of the Doctor of the Church, St. John of the Cross, to further explicate this doctrine found in Hebrews: “In giving us his Son, his only Word (for he possesses no other), he spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word—and he has no more to say. . . because what he spoke before to the prophets in parts, he has now spoken all at once by giving us the All Who is His Son. Any person questioning God or desiring some vision or revelation would be guilty not only of foolish behavior but also of offending him, by not fixing his eyes entirely upon Christ and by living with the desire for some other novelty” (as quoted in CCC, 65; ellipsis in orig.).

to his Christian sensibilities. Nor does Percy's devotion to the Church work against his Christocentrism. When Wood observes, "It will not suffice, in Percy's view, for believers to maintain the integrity of the Gospel within the walls of the church," he ought not imagine that Percy is thereby undermining either the efficacy of the ecclesial sacraments or the fullness of Christ's perfect sacrifice. Wood says, "The heart of Percy's Catholic existentialism lies in the Pascalian belief that paradox and incommensurability are our essential inheritance" (153). Although this "Pascalian belief" is certainly an important component of Percy's Catholic existentialism, I would contend that what lay at the heart of Percy's faith is a very clear and complete devotion to Jesus Christ, something much more real and relatable than mere doctrinal formulae. Moreover, this paradox in particular—that Christ is both the Fullness of Truth and that the Divine Mystery reveals himself in a myriad of ways, such as in human speech and knowledge—is not Percy's own, except in the sense that he, himself, has embraced it, but rather what the Catholic Church, as a whole, understands to be the case. In other words, the Protestant "insistence" on Christ to the exclusion of human knowledge is neither in counter-distinction to, nor does it mitigate, Percy's and Catholicism's love for either Christ or for humanity; in fact, to deny one at the expense of the other is, according to Catholic belief, to deny both.

Let us, again, refer to the words of that great Eastern Father of the Church, St. Basil the Great, to help us see the relationship between faith and reason. In *On the Holy Spirit*, Basil teaches that Christ perfectly reveals the Father through the Holy Spirit, but such perfect revelation does not eclipse human knowledge but rather necessitates it. This

convergence of the human and the divine forms the palpitating heart of the mystery of the Incarnation. Basil writes:

Those who are idle in the pursuit of righteousness count theological terminology as secondary, together with the attempts to search out the hidden meaning in this phrase or that syllable, but those conscious of the goal of our calling realize that we are to become like God, as far as this is possible for human nature. But we cannot become like God unless we have knowledge of Him, and without lessons there will be no knowledge. Instruction begins with the proper use of speech...Hunting truth is no easy task; we must look everywhere for its tracks. (16)

By indicating the importance of discipline and the pursuit of knowledge and acumen, St. Basil is in no way repudiating the necessity of grace, the resurrection of Christ, or the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Basil's admonition to be rigorous in lessons and learning is not meant to be left there, but rather to be the first step to wisdom—to let our being made in the Divine Mystery's image to grow into the Divine Mystery's likeness. Likewise, Percy's insistence on human seeking is conducive to divine revelation—specifically and completely in Jesus Christ.

Percy uses his Uncle Will not as a role model, but via the fictional Aunt Emily, a model of human seeking without true satisfaction. Relying on the work of the literary critic Richard King, Wood is convinced that Walker Percy would do better to describe his Uncle William Percy as a "Catonist" rather than a "Stoic." Wood says, "Given such severe differences between classical Stoicism and Will Percy's modern pessimism, Walker Percy is only partially right to call his foster father a Southern Stoic" (139). It may be true, as Wood and King claim, that "Stoicism is more optimistic than pessimistic," but this seems to have little to do with whether "Catonist" is a better descriptor than "Stoic" for William Percy. More important is Will's voracious

accumulation and acceptance of “paganism”—as the atheistic cousin, himself, calls it—after abandoning his Catholic faith.

Whether the paganism of Walker Percy’s Uncle William or of Binx Bolling’s Aunt Emily is better described as “Catonist” or “Stoic” is beside the point. Since both Walker and Will describe the worldview as “stoical,” I see no need to trade it for “Catonist.” In any case, the paganism of the fictional aunt and the factual uncle seems to mimic a radical “Christian” fundamentalism that is not, in fact, Christian at all. For Walker Percy’s purposes, the most important distinction between Lucius Annaeus Seneca’s stoicism and William Alexander Percy’s is that the former is unbaptized while the latter is apostate.³⁸ Uncle Will, as a baptized Catholic, partakes of *heresy*, “the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith” (CCC 2089). In *Lanterns on the Levee*, Will describes both his heretical inclinations and finally his *apostasy*, or “total repudiation of the Christian faith” (2089). Wood says, “Soon after becoming a student at Sewanee [The Episcopal University of the South], Will Percy threw over his ardent Catholicism for an equally ardent atheism” (95). A careful reading of Will Percy’s memoir, however, reveals that his Catholicism was not as “ardent” as it was presumptuous and scrupulous.

Percy characterizes the relinquishment of his faith almost like Paul’s conversion on the road to Damascus but in reverse. He begins Chapter nine, “Sewanee,” boasting about his education and experience: “I had been exposed to enough personalities mellow

³⁸ According to the medieval hagiographical book, *The Golden Legend*, St. Paul converted Seneca to Christianity near Seneca’s death. In any case, at least Seneca’s pre-conversion philosophy of life embodies stoic paganism.

and magnificent to educate a Hottentot and in the process I had somehow received enough formal instruction to condition me for college” (92).³⁹ Amidst the descriptions of how various books and friends influenced him and how grateful he is to those influences, he suddenly interrupts himself to recount his loss of faith: “I suppose crises occurred, problems pressed, decisions had to be made, those four shining years, but for me only one altered the sunlight” (95). The very paragraph in which Will describes his sudden conversion to atheism, he relates: “*Once a month* I would ride ten miles down the wretched mountain road to Winchester, go to confession, hear mass, and take communion” (95, emphasis added). For the Catholic, the absence that is present here should be striking. Catholics are called to attend mass every Sunday.⁴⁰ For Will to have deliberately planned to go to mass only once a month is rather problematic from the Catholic perspective. As Will describes it, he is already in grave sin. The following narration is a fitting end to Will’s ongoing and unrepentant slothfulness:

I had been thinking, I had never stopped thinking, I was determined to be honest if it killed me. So I knelt in the little Winchester church and examined my conscience and prepared for confession. How it came about did not seem sudden or dramatic or anything else but sad. As I started to the confessional I knew there was no use going, no priest could absolve me, no church could direct my life or my judgment, what most believed I could not believe. (95)

³⁹ A “Hottentot” or “Khoikhoi” is one of the inhabitants of Cape Province, South Africa in the 17th Century.

⁴⁰ Weekly participation in the Sunday Mass is the beginning, not the entirety of Catholic devotion. The Catholic Catechism says, “The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin” (2181).

Will Percy's sloth, in a general sense, is not peculiar to him. Both Walker and Flannery often remind us that it is a sin that is especially prominent in our know-it-all, technological age. The two Catholic novelists, themselves, recognize its allure. In Brad Gooch's biography of O'Connor, Gooch points out that O'Connor wrote Betty Hester that she shared certain "faults" with her father, Ed O'Connor. Gooch adds, "[Sally] Fitzgerald surmised that these unnamed 'faults' included 'sloth,' a vice Flannery O'Connor often claimed for herself" (43). One might confuse O'Connor's self-accusation of sloth with physical laziness, the telltale symptom of her dreaded disease, lupus, which she shared with her father, but O'Connor was referring, once again, to "a different kind of horror." Will's sloth is different from O'Connor's and Percy's not because it is persistent but because Will seems content to rest in it, but as Augustine says in his *Confessions*, "Sloth pretends that it wants quietude: but what sure rest is there save the Lord?" (31).

Faith and Reason in Catholic Fiction

Returning to Wood's analysis of Percy and O'Connor, let us first acknowledge that Wood recognizes, to a large extent, the redemptive value of O'Connor and Percy's work; nevertheless, he fails to perceive their peculiarly Catholic desire and ability to unite faith with reason. As previously stated, Wood believes that Percy's humanism somehow detracts from his appeal to and for Christ. Wood is not the only one. Many literary critics who have written about Percy and O'Connor think along the same lines—and not only with Percy and O'Connor but also with innumerable other authors. Furthermore, many critics have insisted upon this view more deeply and broadly than Wood has. For the Christian, falling away from Christ as the source and summit of all that exists is both a

moral and aesthetic failure, but for the atheist, it is seen as a kind of artistic salvation. Catholic literary theory proposes that the mistake by both Christians and non-Christians alike consists especially in treating certain beliefs of the Catholic faith as cold and contradictory when they might be, in fact, living and complementary.

This kind of reductionism leads good literary critics to make claims about O'Connor and Percy's Catholicism that are rather inconsistent with their stated beliefs, even while those same critics intuit the value of the artists and their art. These misunderstandings would be more understandable if they were not about, specifically, practicing Catholic authors. The Catholic Church is unique among most religions insofar as it has a teaching body that guards and teaches from year to year and century to century precisely what she believes Christ has revealed. Both O'Connor and Percy embraced this Catholic peculiarity wholeheartedly. As O'Connor writes to Dr. Ted Spivey, an English teacher at Georgia State University: "You know where I stand, what I believe because I am a practicing Catholic, but I can't know what you believe unless I ask you" (HB 341). Alfred Kazin, a mutual acquaintance of O'Connor and Percy, concludes his essay, "Southern Isolates: Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy," with this slanted praise for the two Catholic artists: "The southern writer's secret is still to believe that the world is moral, historical, meaningful" (221). If the world is no longer these things, was it ever? Was it never so, and only naively believed to be so? As the Catechism says, "We do not believe in formulas, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch" (170). Kazin cannot refuse the beauty of O'Connor's and Percy's fiction, yet like so

many others, he feels compelled to deny that their fiction was written the way it was written *because* they were Catholic instead of *despite* their being Catholic.

Kazin points out that in Milledgeville he had an exchange with O'Connor's parish priest, who "told me once that she was constantly berating him for admiring conventional fiction" (216), but for all that, Kazin ends up describing O'Connor and her literature as being either more Fundamentalist or Nihilistic than Catholic. His portrayal of O'Connor's fiction sounds more appropriate for Kantian philosophy. Kazin characterizes O'Connor's actual life as a veritable hell: "She was a doomed young woman who had nothing to do in her short life but write fiction" (216). Kazin's depiction might be accurate except that it ignores O'Connor's Catholic faith, in which suffering—insofar as it is united to Christ's suffering—is always redemptive. Without that faith, O'Connor would lack hope and love amidst the terrible suffering that she endured from having Lupus. Kazin, in that case, would probably have been correct in saying that in O'Connor's fiction, "the only real issue is the primal fault" (216). But here, as with regard to Percy's fiction, Kazin has missed the crucial point. In O'Connor's fiction, the "primal fault" is certainly most apparent, but it is secondary to the only real issue—the Divine Mystery's creating, redeeming, and sanctifying love for mankind. This same love was at work in O'Connor's life as well as her fiction.

Considering Kazin's characterization of O'Connor's life and art, it is no surprise to see how he only half-understands Percy's *Moviegoer*—praising the novel highly for its sublime portrayal of modern alienation but finally having hold of the "wrong horror," as O'Connor would say. Kazin says, "It was a brilliant novel about our abandonment, or

Verworfenheit, as the existentialists used to say—our cast-off state...it was, in fact, a book about an outsider for outsiders” (219). Kazin is right that *The Moviegoer* is about *Verworfenheit* (G: “depravity”), but it is not an essential depravity in the Lutheran vein of belief. In another essay about Percy, Kazin thinks that he is praising Percy by saying that Percy is “still looking” (Pilgrimage 103), but Kazin does not understand pilgrimage in the same way Percy does.

A work of art does not convey precisely what the artist believes because it transcends human thought and emotion. As the 19th Century Southern poet and priest, Fr. Abram Ryan, puts it, his art is but the foam of the ocean of his thought. The interpretation of art, however, ought to begin, at least, with what the author believed it to be. It is helpful to return to the Russian term for the “torn spirituality” of the Underground Man, *Tocka*. Kazin, like so many Percy/O’Connor critics, fails to recognize the indispensable redemption imbedded in the work. As in his analysis of O’Connor, Kazin covers Percy in the doom and gloom of an essential nihilism. He determines that Percy’s first step of writing the story of Bolling’s “state of journeying” was, instead, the author’s last one. Kazin says, “[*The Moviegoer*] was evidently and deeply the expression of some inner struggle. The author himself seemed in some fundamentals to feel himself in the wrong, to be an outsider in relation to his society” (Isolates 219). Kazin’s assessment of Percy’s psyche is correct as far as it goes, but Kazin does no mention of Christ, who for Percy makes all the difference.

Kazin confuses the Catholic writer’s recognition of the reality of sin with an unnatural and unfounded psychological guilt and fear leading to despair. Indeed, it would

be precisely that if there were no context of historical salvation. As St. Paul says, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). Christ’s resurrection has both individual and universal implications, literary and otherwise. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, Bolling is doomed in his sin with all humanity, but even insofar as Christ has risen from the dead, Bolling may still live in despair, and as the novel’s epigraph indicates—perhaps even in that greatest of all despairs of not knowing he is in it.

Although these insights from critics like Wood and Kazin concerning the artistic achievement of Percy’s *Moviegoer* do not go far enough, they remain both well deserved and helpful. Kazin’s description of *The Moviegoer* as “a sardonic, essentially philosophical novel about the spiritual solitude of a young stockbroker in the New Orleans suburb of Gentilly” (216) is an apt one. Or again, when Kazin says that *The Moviegoer* is “essentially a sophisticated search of the search for faith in a world that seems almost bent on destroying faith,” Kazin is correct. The moviegoer’s poetically philosophical and melodious musing is beautifully ambiguous and meticulously executed; it is like music to our 21st century ears:

What is the nature of the search? you ask. Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. [...] To become aware of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. (13)

Bolling’s wonder and wandering echoes that of the Jewish critic, George Steiner, in *Real Presences* or Meursault in Camus’s *The Stranger*, but from Percy’s Catholic perspective, the search—by itself—is not enough. On the contrary, to seek endlessly and without end is to be in despair. It is to be lost. Notwithstanding Steiner’s proclamation that Thomism

is dead, Aquinas expresses the inadequacy of the search for the Divine Mystery without ever attaining the Divine Mystery quite beautifully: “Faith is a kind of knowledge, inasmuch as the intellect is determined by faith to some knowable object. But this determination by faith to some knowable object does not proceed from the vision of the believer, but from the vision of Him Who is believed” (Q. 12, A. 13, Reply Obj 3).

Like Aquinas, Percy perceives faith as a kind of knowledge that works in accordance with but also transcends empirical knowledge. According to Percy,

The wrong questions are being asked. The proper question is not whether God has died or been superseded by the urban-political complex. The question is not whether the Good News is no longer relevant, but rather whether it is possible that man is presently undergoing a tempestuous restructuring of his consciousness which does not presently allow him to take account of the Good News. (113)

The primary meaning of *presently* is “in a little while,” so Percy’s insight from the 1950’s might be now in full bloom. Thus, Bolling’s identity crisis in the middle of the twentieth century has probably only become exacerbated at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Percy continues:

For what has happened is not merely the technological transformation of the world but something psychologically even more portentous. It is the absorption of the laymen not of the scientific method but rather of the magical aura of science, whose credentials he accepts for all sectors of reality. Thus in the lay culture of scientific society nothing is easier than to fall prey to a kind of seduction which sunders one’s very self from itself into an all-transcending “objective” consciousness and a consumer-self with a list of “needs” to be satisfied. It is this monstrous bifurcation of man into angelic and bestial components against which old theologies must be weighed before new theologies are erected. Such a man could not take account of God, the devil, and the angels if they were standing before him, because he has already peopled the universe with his own hierarchies. When the novelist writes of a man “coming to himself” through some such catalyst as catastrophe or ordeal, he may be offering obscure testimony to a gross disorder of consciousness and to the need of recovering oneself as neither angel nor organism but as a wayfaring creature somewhere between. (113)

According to Percy, what modern man has lost is his identity as being made in the Divine Mystery's image and has imagined for himself his own gods. For all his railings about the "oppressive hierarchies" from the days of yore, modern man is oppressed and oppressing more, and more, he does not know it. While science and technology are not intrinsically evil, modern man, as his ancestors before him, has subtly and sleepily granted his heart's throne to something other than the Divine Mystery. Bolling says that his father's family "think that the world makes sense without God," but "the good life" does not seem to come so easy for Bolling, who writes in his notebook something similar to Percy's statement about the plight of modern man: "REMEMBER TOMORROW [...] The only possible starting point: the strange fact of one's own invincible apathy—that if the proofs were proved and God presented himself, nothing would be changed" (146).

Ennui, Leisure, and the Little Way

Bolling is an *everyman*, an *everymodernman*, whose materialism blinds him to spiritual realities. The commonness of his plight does not lessen the horror of it—it deepens it. He has rebelled against his creator, in whose image he was created, and thereby he has lost the Divine Mystery's likeness, though not the Divine Mystery's love. This rebellion, however, is not peculiar to modern man, though modern man often foolishly takes pride in it as if it were something unique to him. The Catholic Church believes that man, in his own nature, "unites the spiritual and material worlds" (CCC 355), but Bolling, as an *everyman*, has become in his sloth and pride to a large extent numb to his position as a nexus of the Divine Mystery's grace. For Percy, postmodernity, if it ever arrived, is now gone, and still modern man languishes in his overwrought

individualism. In Percy's *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. Tom More diagnoses the cultural situation in literary terms near the end of the second millennium, *Anno Domini*: "American Literature is not having its finest hour" (19). More then comments on Catholic Literature, in particular: "The Catholic literary renaissance, long awaited, failed to materialize" (19). Percy's protagonists are often losing their identities insofar as they succumb to a spiritual, as well as a physical and mental, malaise. Unlike the symptoms of fatigue and poor appetite from Lonnie's Hepatitis in *The Moviegoer*, the root of Bolling's boredom is almost entirely spiritual. According to Percy, however, since the Divine Mystery has entered the world, hope remains—both for history and for literature. Even Binx Bolling remains in the Divine Mystery's love.

As stated earlier in this essay, Bolling does not have proper leisure on Sunday. Bolling's relationship with his half-brother Lonnie, however, provides a much-needed place of rest and holy leisure for Bolling. Catholicism believes that Christians "also sanctify Sunday by devoting time and care to their families and relatives, often difficult to do on other days of the week. Sunday is a time for reflection, silence, cultivation of the mind, and meditation which furthers the growth of the Christian interior life" (CCC 2186). Spending time with his half-brother is one place where Bolling takes part in what his faith believes, although it is not on purpose. He says, "For Lonnie our Sundays together have a program. First we talk, usually on a religious subject; then we take a ride; then he asks me to do him like Akim" (164). Bolling explains, "During my last year in college I discovered that I was picking up the mannerisms of Akim Tamiroff, the only useful thing, in fact, that I learned in the entire four years" (165). Bolling's aside

concerning his ability to mimic the movie actor from Georgia (the country) reveals how useless, in a sense, Bolling felt his liberal arts college education was.⁴¹ Such an education is supposed to have equipped Bolling with the necessary tools to live life well, with leisure, and to heed the Socratic warning against an unexamined life, but instead, Bolling says that only knowledge he gained was to act like the actor who inspired the villainous cartoon character Boris Badenov on *The Rocky and Bullwinkle Show*, which began airing a year before *The Moviegoer* was published.

Paradoxically, at the moment Bolling seems furthest away from self-knowledge, he is closest. Realizing that he has learned nothing but imitation, he is finally approaching the imitation of Christ, who according to Bolling's Catholic faith *is* the way, the truth, and the life (cf. John 14:6). Bolling and Lonnie's relationship images Christ-like love; it is an aperture in the dark sphere of Bolling's death-in-life through which the light of Christ clearly streams. This is not to say that Bolling's search is over—far from it. Immediately following the scene with Lonnie, Bolling is once again mindlessly “spinning” along in his MG and putting his “hand on the thickest and innermost part of Sharon's thigh” (166). He is a long way off and distracted by and worried about many things, when there is only one thing that he needs to be doing. Just as Bolling is having true Sunday leisure with Lonnie, he remembers, “I must get those plans” (165). Bolling is talking about his plans for the property he is selling. He is talking about making money,

⁴¹ When telling stories of his family friend and writer, Sam Yerger, there is a clue to what his alma mater is. He says, “At the City College of Mexico I had met this girl from U.C.L.A named Pat Pabst” (169).

but he is also talking about his larger, more vague scheme to continue his life as a vagabond—to keep on “fighting” the malaise by giving into it.

Bolling knows that he needs to keep fighting, but he is fighting the wrong battle. He calls the enemy of his grand search “everydayness” or “the Little Way.” He says, “It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little care and a warm deep thigh” (136) and “Everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible” (145). Ironically, it is *everydayness* that Bolling must embrace to continue fighting “the good fight” (cf. 2 Tim. 4:5) effectively; however, Bolling is correct in his skepticism of being able to do so according to his Aunt Emily’s advice—“by his own lights.”

The doctor of the church and near contemporary of Dostoevsky, St. Therese of Lisieux, also develops in her spiritual autobiography, *Story of a Soul*, a theology of what she calls “the Little Way of Love.” It is this simple preposition “of Love” that might transform Bolling’s “sad little happiness of drinks and kisses” into “the big happiness” of the Divine Mystery’s infinite mercy and peace. Lisieux explains to her Mother superior, “How sweet is the *way of love*, dear Mother. True, one can fall or commit infidelities, but knowing how to draw profit from everything, love quickly consumes everything that can be displeasing to Jesus” (179, emphasis added). St. Therese’s little way of love is the perfect antidote to Bolling’s “Little Way” of despair.

There is no magical way to obtain this antidote to despair. One must love the Divine Mystery to love others as well as for others to love him. Bolling says that Lonnie is his “favorite” sibling and “good friend” because “for one thing, he has the gift of

believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ" (137). Even if Bolling does not believe that the Divine Mystery loves him, he knows that Lonnie does, and illuminated by the teachings of the faith, such human love given and received can be the beginning of our relationship with the Divine Mystery, even if such a relationship is ostensibly rejected or ignored. In St. Therese's characteristically dramatic fashion, she expresses the peculiarity of Christ's love, in which Lonnie participates and Bolling, perhaps, vaguely recognizes: "O my God! Is Your distained Love going to remain closed up within Your Heart? It seems to me that if You were to find souls offering themselves as victims of holocaust to Your Love, You would consume them rapidly" (181). As the Church would see it, Bolling's sense of restlessness and inadequacy brings him closer to the work of grace than his Aunt Emily's facile self-assurance does because it corresponds to the reality that without the Divine Mystery, Christian love is impossible.

Acknowledging the mysteries of the faith, Bolling will never end his search but will remain ever restless, unless or until he finds Christ's abiding love with sacramental concreteness present within his heart. Echoing St. Augustine's profound insight and anticipating the uniqueness of Lonnie's love for Bolling, St. Therese observes that Jesus commands his disciples to love one another *as he loves them* only after he grants them the gift of the Eucharist. Again writing to her Mother Superior, the Carmelite nun confesses her discovery of the meaning of charity:

I had never fathomed the meaning of these words of Jesus: "The second commandment is LIKE the first: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" [Matt. 22:39]. I applied myself especially to loving God, and it is in loving Him that I understood my love was not to be expressed only in words[...] But at the Last

Supper, when He knew the hearts of His disciples were burning with a more ardent love for Him who had just given Himself to them in the unspeakable mystery of His Eucharist, this sweet Savior wished to give them a new commandment. He said to them with inexpressible tenderness: “A new commandment I give you that you love one another THAT AS I HAVE LOVED YOU, YOU ALSO LOVE ONE ANOTHER. By this all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” [John 13:34-35]. (219, sic)

The evidence that Bolling retains the likeness of his Creator consists in his “search”—that he is “onto something.” He cannot love like Christ and his brother Lonnie, who abides in Christ, love, but he glimpses at that reality through Lonnie. From the pew, he watches Lonnie go up to receive communion—“All I can see of Lonnie is a weaving tuft of red hair” (160). Lonnie’s hair might be the only “tongue of fire” that Bolling sees resting on his head, but that is more than if the Holy Spirit appeared to him as a dove because his love for Lonnie anticipates and in a sense communicates the divine.

Bolling’s escapism is habitual; Lonnie calls Bolling back to reality. When Bolling becomes distracted with his worldly plans, Lonnie begins to ask him something: “Do you think that Eucharist—” He breaks off, and neither Bolling nor the reader knows what Lonnie is about to say. Taking a different tact, Lonnie says, “I am still offering my communion for you” (165). What the Catechism says about Lonnie’s actions are especially striking—that “Our Eucharistic Lord” is the greatest manifestation of the Divine Mystery’s love for mankind and the culmination of his plan for our salvation. Contrary to Bolling’s sundry and sultry “plans,” Catholicism offers a different way:

The Eucharist is ‘the source and summit of the Christian life.’ The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch. (CCC 1324)

Bolling observes that Lonnie has a tendency to use a liturgical lexicon, but unlike whenever others talk about the Divine Mystery, Bolling seems to listen to Lonnie. Lonnie's devotion to Bolling by offering his communion for him is a symbol of Eucharistic devotion, insofar as the Eucharist is "the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being" (CCC 1325). Just as there is a religious, or rather anti-religious, sense to Bolling's "plans," there is a deeper meaning with respect to Lonnie's "communion" with Bolling because it is also a communion *for* him.

Bolling's ritual time with Lonnie does not fulfill his Sunday obligation, but it is a step in that direction. In a sense, Lonnie does for Bolling what St. Paul says he does for the Church in Colossae: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col. 1:24). It is helpful to know that for the Catholic, this dynamic culminates in and through the Eucharist. Bolling confesses he does not know why his family prays for him to "recover" his faith, since one cannot regain what one never had:

My unbelief was invincible from the beginning. I could never make head or tail of God. The proofs of God's existence may have been true for all I know, but it didn't make the slightest difference. If God himself appeared to me, it would have changed nothing. In fact, I have only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in my head. (145)

Bolling turns the Calvinistic doctrine of "invincible grace" on its head and inside out.

Whereas John Calvin insists that the Holy Spirit will ineluctably turn the elect from being wild and savage beasts into meek little lambs, Bolling does not say that he goes the other way—he simply is not part of the game at all.

Bolling unwittingly senses that he will not, or even cannot, be forced to believe in the Divine Mystery. This belief is a part of his Catholic faith—that the Divine Mystery invites and urges each person into a relationship with him, but the Divine Mystery will not, or even cannot according to his eternal covenant, violate human freedom. This Catholic belief does not imply that the Divine Mystery is indifferent to our love. He longs for it more than the human heart can comprehend. As the Catechism says: “For [man] the heavens and the earth, the sea and all the rest of creation exist. God attached so much importance to his salvation that he did not spare his own Son for the sake of man” (358). Although the Catholic Church believes that the Divine Mystery gave man everything in Jesus, she also trusts that the Divine Mystery’s involvement with his creation did not end with Christ’s death. The Catechism continues, “Nor does [God] ever cease to work, trying every possible means, until he has raised man up to himself and made him sit at his right hand” (358). Lonnie’s self-giving and self-sacrificing love for Bolling images and conveys the Divine Mystery’s tireless love for man. It is part of the Divine Mystery’s work through the free response of his Bride, the Church. This Catholic belief concerning human freedom acknowledges, rather than subverts, the Divine Mystery’s love for non-believers like Bolling, since love must proceed from freedom, and freedom from truth. This belief maintains that insofar as freedom is grounded in the truth that we are originally created in the Divine Mystery’s image and likeness, it is not freedom to rebel against him but slavery.

In his “Self-Interview,” Percy says that both the Divine Mystery and the novelist create *ex nihilo*, but in very different ways. Percy answers himself, “The best novels, and

the best part of a novel, is a creatio ex nihilo. Unlike God, the novelist does not start with nothing and make something of it. He starts with himself as nothing and makes something of the nothing with things at hand” (78). Percy, like O’Connor, is so immersed in the Catholic worldview that there is no need to specify it in the novel. For the Catholic novelist, Christian reality *is* reality, just as for the Atheistic novelist or the secular humanist, a universe devoid of the Divine Mystery *is* reality. What is “true” for the author naturally informs what is “true” for his literary creation. Percy contends, however, that even the novelist who sees himself as the ground of existence, i.e. god, cannot escape the influence of Christian reality. The good news for the good novelist, whether Christian or not, is that his novel, insofar as it is a good novel, necessarily taps into the beauty and power of the Divine Mystery’s creation and plan of salvation. Percy uses Camus’s *Stranger* as an example: “Despite Camus’s explicit disavowal of Christianity, his *Stranger* has blood ties with the wayfarer of Saint Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Marcel” (*Message* 111). Percy, in a way, preaches the Catholic faith here; he is also appealing to a tenet of secular humanism with which Catholicism, in a sense, shares—the brotherhood of man that opposes and seeks to remedy the common human propensity toward a destructive isolation and *ennui*. Percy’s literary insight that only love creates, that freedom founded in the truth is the only true freedom—this is something he shares and expresses from his Catholic faith. Finally, love is why Percy is an artist, and why, for Percy, the Divine Mystery is too.

Interchapter One: Existentialism and Catholic Literature

Is there such a thing as Christian existentialism, as Kierkegaard wondered? The catholicity of conditional existentialism allows for both human and divine freedom. O'Connor's vision of mystery and suffering, which is representative of the Catholic understanding of the same, is not a facile optimism that refuses to recognize the horror of evil. On the contrary, in a letter to Winifred McCarthy, O'Connor says, "To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must be made to name himself, and not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion" (117). The Satan of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, for instance, has such poetic power not due to his non-existence but his existence. He is real, and he is deceptively evil. O'Connor reminds us of what the poet Charles Baudelaire has said: "The devil's greatest wile is to convince us that he does not exist" (112). In "The Novelist and the Believer," O'Connor says, "Our salvation is a drama played out with the devil, but a devil who is not simply generalized evil, but an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy" (168). In O'Connor's universe, we, the readers and non-readers of fiction, are caught up in the drama of the Fall of Adam and Eve as much as Satan, himself, is. Unlike Satan, however, we are also caught up in the drama of Adam and Eve's redemption.

As both O'Connor and Percy perceive, the philosophical school of existentialism provides a powerful means to explore the overlap of literary theory and literary theology. In 1945, the Catholic philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, coined the word "existentialism" and applied it to Sartre, who initially rejected the term but later embraced it in his lecture

Existentialism is a Humanism. Although Sartre's and Marcel's philosophies are rather opposed to each other, there exists a kind of paradoxical unity in what might be called "conditional existentialism." The condition involves the question of the Divine Mystery's essence and existence. There are important implications that follow from whether the Divine Mystery exists. Furthermore, certain Christian, and more specifically, Catholic claims concerning who the Divine Mystery is directly influence morality and our conception of the human being. Both Sartre and Marcel agree that *without* the Divine Mystery, life is nothing and the human person is without meaning, yet Sartre and Marcel seem to see the absence of the Divine Mystery as both freeing and enslaving in opposite ways.

Although categorizing thinkers, such as Aristotle and Augustine or Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, as existentialists is somewhat anachronistic, many of the ideas of such thinkers anticipate and inform existentialism as a philosophical approach to life. As a "philosophical system," existentialism is peculiar because it is, in many ways, a kind of *anti-philosophy* with its tendencies toward disunity, the absurd, angst, despair, and its insistence on the value of the individual or person. Existentialism is prevalent in art, biology, psychology, theology, literature, and theater. In *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, Marcel suggests, "Existentialism stands today at a parting of the ways: it is, in the last analysis, obliged either to deny or to transcend itself" (88). For Marcel, existentialism undermines itself insofar as it clings to a crude kind of materialism. Marcel quotes Sartre as having said, "Matter is the only reality I am able to grasp" (89). Here is Marcel's response to Sartre: "I am persuaded that this negative realism...cannot go

without a corresponding devaluation of the truly human modes of existence” (89).

According to Marcel, Sartre’s mantra of freedom is a misnomer, since a “freedom” that denies the truth of one’s existence is no real freedom. In “Testimony and Existentialism,” Marcel observes that Sartre admits that “there is a Christian version of existentialism,” but Marcel contends that one should not necessarily stress the Christian character of existentialism since “many people are liable to adhere to it who do not regard themselves as Christians” (91). The fact that Christian existentialism is a kind of existentialism available to non-believers emphasizes both the reasonableness and the accessibility of Christian existentialism. This version of existentialism does not belong to Christianity in an exclusive way; rather, it expresses the truth of the human being as being made for love. Christian existentialism is not for Christians alone because it constitutes a sound understanding of the human individual and humanity as a whole.

Pope St. John Paul the Great, in the encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*, speaks into the contributions of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas with respect to the threefold structure of philosophical enquiry. Regarding the last of these thinkers, John Paul II says, “Thomas recognized that nature, philosophy’s proper concern, could contribute to the understanding of divine revelation. Faith therefore has no fear of reason” (*FR* 58). The encyclical indicates three positions toward understanding reality. The first approach posits that faith *alone* is the explanation; the second claims that reason is all that is needed; the third and final view points to a kind of synergy that exists between the two. Accordingly, faith and reason do not ultimately contradict one another. The epigraph

of *Fides et Ratio* beautifully expresses the Catholic (and catholic as in “universal”) notion of the intimate bond that faith and reason share:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart the desire to know the truth — in a word, to know himself — so that by knowing and loving God, men and women can come to the fullness of the truth about themselves (cf. Ex 33:18; Ps 27:8-9; 63:2; Jn 14:8; 1 Jn 3:2). (7)

Fides et Ratio echoes what Aristotle says in *The Metaphysics* concerning the central question of philosophy, namely “What is that which is?” It is this desire to know the truth that motivates us to gain self-knowledge, which goes hand and hand with our desire to know the principles of nature and most especially knowledge of the Divine Mystery.

Augustine’s *Confessions* is particularly concerned with the interrelatedness between faith and reason—that we do, in a sense, create ourselves through our actions, but only in a secondary sense to being created by the Divine Mystery. Both “acts of creation,” however, are crucial for understanding what the human being is. In truth, the Divine Mystery creates man, and through freedom, man creates himself, since as the writer of Genesis observes, man is created in the image and likeness of the Divine Mystery. In Book XIII, Augustine writes the following concerning Genesis 1:26: “When in newness of mind he sees and understands Your truth, man does not need any other man to teach him to imitate his kind” (309). The Divine Mystery creates the human being in the divine *image*, and accordingly, man has the capacity to increase his being in the *likeness* of his creator. For St. Augustine, however, the connection between faith and reason does not mean that the objects of faith always seem reasonable. The *Confessions* is, in a way, the story of Augustine seeking more and more to reconcile his faith in the Divine Mystery with the limitations of his intellect. Augustine strives to be ever more

like the Divine Mystery, in whose image he is made, and often he fails; however, it is out of this *striving* that Augustine's likeness to the Divine Mystery paradoxically emerges.

Fides et Ratio corroborates St. John Paul the Great's book *Love and Responsibility*, which states that although freedom is very important, it must proceed from Truth in order to be authentic. Pope John Paul II, as Karol Wojtyla, introduces *Love and Responsibility* with the following words: "The world in which we live consists of many objects" (3). Although *Love and Responsibility* emphasizes the subjectivity of the human person, this simple statement concerning objective reality begins the work. The idea that something is "true for me" but perhaps "not true for you" points to the fact that people have different beliefs. Saying "such-and-such is true for me" is a way of saying "I believe such-and-such." Individual belief—the freedom to choose what one believes—is a kind of goal that must recognize "what is that which is." Perhaps a mundane example will suffice to illustrate the point. The cover of the Yale publication of Sartre's *Existentialism Is a Humanism* features a sturdy-looking chair on apparently solid ground. If the chair were of poor construction and floating on quick sand—this knowledge would significantly change what one believed about "sitting in the chair" of existence.

Chapter Five: Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* without God

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.’ / So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

~Genesis 1:26-27

“‘I believe in a new kind of Jesus,’ he said, ‘one that can’t waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he’s all man and ain’t got any God in him. My church is the Church Without Christ!’”

~ Hazel Motes, *Wise Blood* 121

The question of providence and conditional existentialism, the mystery of divine and human freedom, is at the beating, and metaphorically bleeding, heart of Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God*. The greatest complication of Lester Ballard's identity, in a sense, hinges on the availability of grace, which seems woefully lacking for the wretched protagonist. The reader knows not whether to sympathize with or simply scorn him. St. Thomas Aquinas states the mystery with characteristic clarity and conciseness: “Things other than God can be relatively infinite, but not absolutely infinite” (55 Q.7, A. 2). He says that angels and human beings are relatively infinite because the Divine Mystery,

who alone is absolutely infinite, communicates and conveys infinity to them.

Consequently, without the Divine Mystery, even the angels—including Satan himself—would cease to exist. With the Divine Mystery, demonic entities can only strive for destruction in eternal futility. Ballard’s story is narrated in such a way that despite the horrific nature of his crimes, the reader cannot absolutely know the status of Ballard’s apparently senseless soul—his motives, loves, and deepest aspirations. Created in the Divine Mystery’s image, Ballard creates a universe for himself that does not appear to reflect the beneficence of this Creator.

Ballard’s incorrigibility seems to thwart the providential nature of the Divine Mystery. When we last see Ballard alive—“trying to fix his mind where he’d seen the boy when it came to him that the boy looked like himself”—Ballard seems far beyond correction or reform. In retrospect, it seems that he was broken beyond repair even when we first meet him. There is a sense, it seems, in which he is always already a man of dire intent, and it is precisely this seeming fixedness that radically challenges the existence of Providence, who supposedly has everything under control. But there is another way to see it. The word *providence* derives from the Latin *providentia* ‘foresight, precaution, foreknowledge.’ The Catholic connotations of the word—that the Divine Mystery both “sees through us” and “sees us through”—come from the parts that make up the word, i.e. *pro* ‘before’/*per* ‘through’ and *video* ‘seen.’ Thus, *pro-video* means not only “to foresee” but also “to provide for” and “take care of.” The Catholic Catechism defines *providence* as “the dispositions by which God guides his creation toward its perfection yet to be attained; the protection and governance of God over all creation” (302). Romano

Guardini, a favorite theologian of Flannery O'Connor, devotes an entire chapter to the idea of divine providence in his work *The Living God*. Guardini elaborates on our creative co-operation with the Divine Mystery:

Providence is not a ready-made machine but is created from the newness of the freedom of God and also from our small human freedom. Not just anywhere, but here. Not just at any time, but now. It is a mystery of the Living God, and you will experience it to the extent that you surrender yourself to it, not letting it merely pass over you, but co-operating with it. You are being called. God is drawing you into the weft of His providential creation. You must realize in your conscience what is at stake. You must set to work with your hands. You must use your freedom. As a living person you must stand within the living activity of God. (27)

The smallness and often mean-spiritedness of this “small human freedom” is magnified, to a terrible and terrifying point, in the character of Lester Ballard. One cannot, however, truly see the ghost image of Lester’s smallness until he first gazes at the full brilliance of the “Holy Ghost image” that Ballard is meant to be. The providential nature of the novel is also expressed via its invitation to the reader to “see through” the eyes of Ballard, which in a sense reflects the movement by which the Second Person of the Trinity becomes Man and “sees through” our human eyes.

A Child of God...Perhaps

Guardini’s observation represents the long-standing tradition of the Catholic Church with regard to human and divine freedom. Drawing from the thomistic view of the Divine Mystery’s omniscience and omnipotence, Guardini says with respect to the human soul, “It is you who act—if I may put it like this with all the due humility of the creature—in agreement with Him” (27). But even this formulation, for Guardini, seems to eclipse the significant distinction between the Divine Mystery’s freedom and our own, since he adds, “No—take it back. He acts alone. And yet, when God alone is acting, then

only are we really ourselves...And that is Providence” (27). Accordingly, the Church teaches that the blessing of the saints and angels is the curse of the damned in hell. The rare intimations of Ballard’s soul seem disinclined toward the transcendent. The climactic scene of *Child of God* is when Ballard emerges from his cave after his strange introduction into the world of perversity and murder. The narrator says that Ballard “watched the hordes of cold stars sprawled across the smokehole and wondered what stuff they were made of, or himself” (141). Ballard wonders about not only his own identity but also that of the entire universe. The narrator implicitly compares the “hordes” of stars to the hordes, or “nomadic tribes,” of Israel seeking the Promised Land; furthermore, Ballard’s wandering and wondering evokes, in a sense, the entire history of Israel, the Catholic Church, and finally, the whole of humanity. The description of the stars as “hordes” also carries with it the connotation of ferocity and plague, since horde can specifically refer to a pack or a swarm, as in a “horde of wolves” or “hordes of locusts,” respectively. A horde of bats, in fact, fly out of Ballard’s cave and make way for his anti-contemplative gaze upon the stars.

Before examining the curses involved in the narrator’s allusion to the stars, we should look at the blessings that precede them. The writer of the New Testament book of Hebrews refers to the Divine Mystery’s promise to Abraham, who allegorically anticipates the children of the Divine Mystery in Christ: “Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born *as many* as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore” (Heb. 11:12). The Divine Mystery says to Abraham: “I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the

sand which is on the seashore” (Gen. 22:17). A major difference between Abraham’s and Ballard’s revelations is that Abraham did not see the stars when the Divine Mystery spoke to him, since Genesis makes it clear that the event took place during the daytime (cf. Gen. 15:5, 12). Ballard sees the stars yet does not believe in any true meaning or purpose in his life; whereas, Abraham does *not* see the stars yet ultimately has faith in the Divine Mystery’s promises.

Mimicking the allegorical interpretation of the Divine Mystery’s promise to Christians, the narrator of *Child of God* implicitly invites the reader to read Ballard, who parodies Christ emerging from the cave after death, in light of the New Testament resurrection. The vintage edition of *Child of God* makes the comparison explicit on its cover, where it shows a cave that looks like it came from the set of Mel Gibson’s *Passion of Christ*. It is significant that we see Ballard both emerging from the tomb and, quite viscerally, the corruption of his mortal body. The narrator gives for the first time a date—April of 1965—to impress the historical importance of Ballard’s literal death. It is a perverse confession of Ballard’s near resurrection but ultimate death: “He contracted pneumonia in April of 1965 and was transferred to the University Hospital where he was treated and apparently recovered. . . . two mornings later was found dead in the floor of his cage” (194). Ballard’s death and corruption is fittingly narrated with precise detail. The narrator, as mock gospel writer, continues:

His body was shipped to the state medical school at Memphis. There in a basement room he was preserved with formalin and wheeled forth to take his place with other deceased persons newly arrived. He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. His muscles were stripped from his bones. His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like

those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. At the end of three months when the class was closed Ballard was scraped from the table into a plastic bag and taken with the others of his kind to a cemetery outside the city and there interred. A minister from the school read a simple service. (194)

According to Catholic theology, for redemption to have been accomplished and salvation made possible, Christ must have risen bodily from the grave, yet at the same time, the precise details of the resurrection remain mysterious. As Benedict XVI notes, “None of the evangelists recounts Jesus’ Resurrection itself. It is an event taking place within the mystery of God between Jesus and the Father” (*Part II* 261). In line with the Orthodox iconology, which does not depict the moment of the resurrection, Benedict says that the resurrection “for us defies description: by its very nature it lies outside human experience” (261). Ballard’s death and subsequent “corruption,” on the other hand, is entirely within human experience.

The corollary belief to Christ’s resurrection is that of his followers. As the writer of Hebrews says, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, / looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith” (Heb. 12:1). The narrator of *Child of God* continues the perverse analogy. Rather than a common resurrection in Christ, there is only final dissolution like and with Ballard and the rest of humanity. Christ’s “cloud of witnesses” is Ballard’s storm of violent martyrs. When Ballard is nearly drowning in the flooded creek—metaphorically suggesting a baptism of sorts—the narrator addresses the reader: “See him. You could say that he’s sustained by his fellow men, like you. Has peopled the shore with them calling to him. A race that gives suck to the maimed and the crazed, that wants their

wrong blood in its history and will have it” (156). Compare Ballard’s Cainian bloodline to that of Christ, as described by the apostle Paul: “You were buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead” (Col. 2:12). The narration’s juxtaposition of Ballard to Christ and his faithful followers is simultaneously wildly humorous and horridly tragic.

The deluge in *Child of God* unmistakably conjures up the flood narrative in Genesis. The high sheriff of Sevier County, who “peered out at the flooded town from under his dripping hatbrim,” draws out the inference when he asks the deputy, “You haven’t seen a old man with a long beard buildin a great big boat anywheres have ye?” (161). The narrator is suggesting not only the literal flood and ark, but also the flood and the ark in their spiritual senses. St. Peter says that the flood and the ark correspond to Baptism, which “now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a clear conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 3:20-21). In the allegorical sense, Noah is a type of Christ, insofar as he saves a remnant of the Divine Mystery’s creation for a renewal of the Divine Mystery’s covenant with Adam, and a subsequent re-creation of the world. According to the moral sense, the Catholic Catechism confirms that “the flood and Noah’s ark prefigured salvation by Baptism” (1094). Finally, according to the eschatological sense, the Catechism says that the Church “is prefigured by Noah’s ark, which alone saves from the flood” (845). When the deputy asks the sheriff whether he thinks that people “was meaner then than they are now,” the old man, who “was looking out at the flooded town,” says, “I think people are the same

from the day God first made one” (168). The narration, thus, points us back, once again, to the original creation, which is inextricably bound to redemption in Christ.

The reader understands the scope of the tragedy and humor of Ballard’s “redemption” in these scenes in direct proportion to the reader’s comprehension of the height of Ballard’s true calling as a “child of God.” The simple fact of Ballard’s humanity—his being of the species *homo sapiens* (L: wise man), notwithstanding his lack of wisdom—includes him in the promise and curse given to Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and all of the saints in Christ Jesus. The ambivalence with respect to how the reader might construe Ballard’s identity reflects Ballard’s own ambivalence with respect to his actions. Ballard maintains a love/hate relationship with both his victims and his deeds. Precisely through Ballard’s depravity, Ballard represents, mostly *via negativa*, a complex example of that high calling about which St. Paul speaks: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own” (1 Cor. 6:19). According to Catholic tradition, this non-belonging to oneself paradoxically is, or can be, the beginning of new life in Christ.

We must understand Ballard’s “redemption” together with his “creation.” Again, as St. Athanasius says in *On the Incarnation*: “The first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning” (26). In *The Resurrection of the Dead*, the second-century Church Father St. Athenagoras, who was a Greek philosopher and Christian convert, anticipates St. Athanasius’s words: “When this examination is made [of Christ’s resurrection], one must put first the reason of man’s creation, that is, the purpose the creator had in making man”

(99). First, however, let us briefly return to O'Connor's meticulously Catholic view on this paradox of self-forgetfulness and self-remembrance.

We have already appreciated to some extent the mystery of divine identity in *Wise Blood*, *Memories*, and *The Moviegoer*. O'Connor, in particular, was well acquainted with this mystery of belonging to the Divine Mystery and also being free in and through him. She writes about it in a letter to her atheist friend, Betty Hester, who expresses confusion concerning what O'Connor called "Christian Realism." Let us examine O'Connor's views on the paradox:

I believe too that there is only one Reality and that is the end of it, but the term, "Christian Realism," has become necessary for me, perhaps in a purely academic way, because I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartment, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs. One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody is your audience. My audience are the people who think God is dead. At least these are the people I am conscious of writing for. (HB 92)

O'Connor is not here preaching a self-righteous gospel to her friend. In fact, she confesses just a few lines later, "I know all about the garden variety, pride, gluttony, envy and sloth, and what is more to the point, my virtues are as timid as my vices" (92).

O'Connor, however, does not end in despair even in the face of sin's relentless tug. She writes, "I think sin occasionally brings one closer to God, but not habitual sin and not this petty kind that blocks every small good" (92). O'Connor's knowledge of herself in the Divine Mystery was a constant striving, or rather a falling again and again, but each time getting up again. Her writing to godless people was a "habit of being," torn and stained as it was.

O'Connor recognized not only the hurdle that must be cleared when writing to an atheistic or agnostic audience, on the one hand; she also spoke about the difficulty of writing for many of her fellow Catholics, on the other. She says, "There are many Catholic readers who open a novel and, discovering the presence of an arm or a leg, piously close the book" (MM 188). Although she expresses that there is, indeed, a responsibility on the author's part in properly depicting "natural matters or the concrete particulars of sin," she emphasizes that how the author represents such things must be judged artistically:

Many Catholic readers are overconcerned of what they consider to be obscenity in modern fiction for the very simple reason that in reading a book, they have nothing else to look for. They are not equipped to find anything else. They are totally unconscious of the design, the tone, the intention, the meaning, or even the truth of what they have in hand. They don't see the book in a perspective that would reduce every part of it to its proper place in the whole. (188)

This admonition to O'Connor's fellow Catholics regarding our responsibility to understand and respect the standards and structure of art is reminiscent of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reprimand of his fellow Lutherans concerning the demand for authentic Christian discipleship: "We Lutherans have gathered like eagles round the carcass of cheap grace, and there we have drunk of the poison which has killed the life of following Christ" (*Cost of Discipleship* 53). O'Connor understands that for every Catholic and Christian living according to his faith, the ultimate reality is, indeed, the Incarnation, but she says that if we have not fully embraced that body of faith, we will fail to communicate love properly. We will not be able to write Catholic novels like *Wise Blood* and *The Moviegoer*. We will not be able to read *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, since the protagonist rejects her Catholic faith. As for *Child of God*, if we make it past the first

sentence, with its “caravan of carnival folk” and its decadently splendid structure, we will most certainly slam the book shut on the second page as soon as we find the child of the Divine Mystery much like ourselves perhaps, standing “straddlelegged, has made in the dark humus a darker pool wherein swirls a pale foam with bits of straw” (4).

Since the narrator first presents Ballard in this “straddlelegged” position, let us begin our examination of him there. The adverb *spraddle-legged* means “with the legs spread apart.” At first, it may seem like the narrator has slightly misspoken. *Spraddle-legged*, not *straddlelegged*, is a word. Then one realizes that *to spraddle* means *to straddle*, as in “with the legs spread apart.” The example the OED provides is from Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*: “It was uncomfortable and his legs were spraddled.” *To straddle*, however, has another definition, namely “to occupy or take up an equivocal position in regard to; to appear to favour both sides of” (6). This straddling is to a certain extent what the entire novel, beginning with its title, is doing. In *Cormac McCarthy*, Robert Jarrett disambiguates some of the novel’s implicit questions:

How can a man like Lester—murderer and necrophile—be a ‘child of God’? Is the narrator’s beginning comment “much like yourself” meant at face value, asserting that Lester shares a fundamental humanity with his Tennessee community and with the community of the novel’s readers? Might the title be an ironic assertion of the opposing view? Or is the comment meant to imply that, inasmuch as Lester shares our humanity, we all share at least a potential for his otherwise inexplicable perversity? (36)

I do not believe that we are over-analyzing McCarthy’s use of the word straddlelegged here. Words are important, especially in McCarthy’s world. In “Cormac McCarthy: the Novel Raised from the Dead,” the writer and poet Robert Morgan says, “Reading McCarthy’s novels you have to look up words every few pages. His sense of the textures of words is unsurpassed” (14). Morgan provides a rationale for using the OED, in

particular, for analyzing McCarthy's work. Morgan says, "Again and again the word I was looking up could only be found there [the OED or *Webster's Third*] (spaleens, clotpolls, lobcocks, runagates, anneloid, blueflooded, jowter)" (14).⁴² In the case of "straddlelegged," which is neither in the OED nor *Webster's Third*, the dictionaries are important for finding the word's absence rather than its presence.

Words, Words, Words

Words are important to the artist who is engrossed in the materiality of her work and to the poet, whose *material* is his words. Hamlet's reply to Polonius's question concerning what Hamlet reads—"Words, words, words" (Act II, Scene 2)—indicates the stuff of poetry, but not just any words. Poetry is made up—as Samuel Taylor Coleridge famously proclaimed—"of the best words in the best order." Gustave Flaubert's *le mot juste* (Fr: the right word) is applicable. Henry James affirms the importance of artistic selection of words and ideas, and adds, "It appears to me that no one can ever have made a seriously artistic attempt without becoming conscious of an immense increase—a kind of revelation—of freedom" (Art 865). Whoever wrote the "Official Web Site of the Cormac McCarthy Society" says that McCarthy "doesn't care for the work of Henry James." If this is so, it seems that both Mary McCarthy and Cormac McCarthy do not care for the work of James, yet both disavowed Catholics are nevertheless concerned with what James is talking about here, namely, artistic selection, artistic freedom, and words, words, words.

⁴² Drawing from the OED, I have provided some very basic definitions for the terms listed here: *spalpeen* (not spaleen)—a common workman; *clotpoll*—blockhead; *lobcock*—country bumpkin; *runagate*—apostate or wanderer; *anneloid*—wormlike animal; *flaccid* (not blueflooded)—limp or feeble; *jowter*—a hawker or peddler.

Morgan observes, “Many of McCarthy’s sentences are like little poems” (19). The poetry of McCarthy’s sentences, however, often begins with the individual words. In the case of the use of *straddlelegged* instead of *spraddlelegged*, McCarthy’s poetry begins with the individual letter. There are other definitions of *straddle* in the OED that might illuminate our understanding of Ballard’s precarious and awkwardly cocksure position at the beginning of the novel. The definition “to double a bet,” for instance, contributes to McCarthy’s word-creation, since Ballard is, in a broad sense, staking his life—and for the Christian, his eternal life—on this anti-Pascalian wager to live in such a dehumanizing manner. Ballard’s compromised position becomes even more poignant for the reader when the auctioneer is introduced to the scene. The auctioneer’s claims concerning the profitability of real estate suggest the risky trade strategy of “straddling the market.” He says, “They is real future in real estate” (5) and “Friends you can double your money on it” (6). The “doubling” that the auctioneer wants to convey is that buying land will increase the buyer’s wealth, but the purchase could just as well “double” in half or even be eliminated completely. That there is “real future” in owning property is certain, but the nature of that future as being auspicious is not so clear.

Instead of continuing this examination in McCarthy’s poetry in this single choice of a word, it is helpful to examine another word—*humus*—in the fragment that began this enquiry and directly follows *straddlelegged*: “has made in the dark humus a darker pool wherein swirls a pale foam with bits of straw” (4). The OED calls *humus* “the dark-brown or black substance resulting from the slow decomposition and oxidization of organic matter” and reveals its etymological roots in the Latin word for soil. As a description of

Ballard—and what Ballard has made—*humus* is both a humorous and dark portrayal of the humanity that we share with Ballard. Ballard’s compromised position, when he first appears in the novel, alludes—rather ominously—to the ontological position of man as described in the second creation story in Genesis, where a “mist went up from the earth and watered the whole face of the ground/—then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:6-7). Rather than the beginning of life that the author of Genesis portrays, the narrator of *Child of God* begins his story of Ballard with death and decay.

After having noted Ballard as an infernal inversion of the creation of man, let us examine more fully that creation: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). The phrase “in his likeness and image” in Hebrew is an idiom that denotes the parent/child relationship. The writer of Genesis, for instance, later says that Adam “begot a son in his own likeness, after his image, and named him Seth” (Gen. 5:3). The use of this Hebrew idiom with respect to the creation of man implies that man’s relationship to the Divine Mystery is not merely that of Artist to artwork but rather Father to son. Insofar as Ballard is of the human race, he is a child of the Divine Mystery, at least according to this filial relationship implied by the Hebrew creation story.

The New Testament more explicitly expresses man’s filial relationship to the Divine Mystery; it also more clearly expresses the moral component to the equation. St. Paul asserts, “For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith” (Gal. 3:26). St. John expresses, rather bluntly, the alternative to being children of the Divine Mystery: “The children of God and the children of the devil are revealed in this way: all who do

not do what is right are not from God, nor are those who do not love their brothers and sisters” (1 John 3:10). According to the New Testament, it would seem that Ballard has fallen short of being affiliated with the Divine Mystery as his Father—a “child of God.”

Ballard’s ambivalence concerning his identity as a free agent springs from the filial—and philological—situation in which he finds himself, namely, that he has the freedom to express or to repress his identity as a child of the Divine Mystery. But not choosing, in the final analysis, is in fact choosing—a damning choice rather than an illuminative one. Ambivalence, as a psychological term, refers to a condition in which two contradictory attitudes are simultaneously taken toward some aspect of reality or even reality as a whole. Psychologists distinguish two types of parental abuse—*ambivalence* and *neglect*. The first is an “active” kind, in which the parents ambivalently relate with their children. Sometimes they are affectionate toward them; other times they are violent with them. The second type is “passive.” It is the abuse of neglect. The parent is simply not available or even entirely absent.⁴³

Ballard’s lived experience seems to be especially that of paternal neglect. Gary Ciuba suggests that the suicidal violence of Ballard’s father perpetuates the vicious cycle within Ballard, who is impelled to express that violence with more than just words. Ciuba

⁴³ The Harvard psychiatry professor, Armand Nicholi, Jr., observes Freud’s belief that one’s personal relationship with God—whether ambivalent or dismissive—is greatly influenced by one’s relationship with one’s father, and that religion is a product of absolutizing this ambivalence towards one’s father (43). Nicholi acknowledges, however, that there is an alternative conclusion to Freud’s atheism, namely, the theism of C.S. Lewis. Nicholi says, “Even as an atheist, Lewis realized his ambivalence toward God—a part of him wanting desperately that God not exist, another part strongly desiring His existence” (52). Thus, according to Lewis, Freud’s wish-fulfillment theory is more applicable in explaining why one would deny God’s existence due to the *negative* feelings one has for his father.

says, “Although the reasons for the elder Ballard’s death remain mysterious, the way it unsettled his son establishes this connection between Lester’s violent childhood and his later violent godhead” (Mimetic 95). Ciuba’s observation about Ballard’s perception and reception of his earthly father’s violence mimics Ballard’s understanding of his heavenly father. Ciuba, however, does not express the crucial distinction that whereas the earthly father is indeed both absent and violent, the heavenly father remains present and steadfast to his wretched son. Certain philosophical formulations of the Divine Mystery’s absolute infiniteness are seen as cold, malicious, or merely intellectual—the horrifically grim, but perhaps not true, reality that is imposed upon us and simply must be accepted in much the same way that Nietzsche’s dark abyss must be by his *ubermensch*. As long as Ballard conflates his earthly and heavenly sonships, so long will he remain in filial inadequacy.

Again, O’Connor’s favored theologian, Guardini, helps elucidate this divine pedagogy as what he sees as the joyful reality of the Father’s spoken love. He reflects deeply on the Divine Mystery’s “hearing us” by inviting us to meditate on the gospel passage: “If our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart” (I John 3:20). Guardini says, “The answer is not: You have done right. Your intentions were good. Be of good cheer. No, the answer is: God is greater than thy heart” (57). This explanation of John’s words maintains the horrific profundity of sin and ignorance which the human heart is capable of committing, and does commit—even fathers to their children and children to their brothers and sisters; at the same time, it shows that Providence is truly “good news” because the Divine Mystery is not only absolutely infinite but also absolutely loving and in love. Guardini points to the central expression of the Divine Mystery’s love—the first

creation by which he gave us to ourselves as his sons and daughters and the second creation by which he gave himself to us through the mystery of the incarnation of his Only Begotten Son. For the Catholic poet, words are important not only because they are the stuff of his creation but also because they remind him that he is a beloved child in and through the Eternal Word (Gr: *λόγος*; L: *Logos*) of the Father.

The Assumption of McCarthy's Catholicism

The notion of Cormac McCarthy as a Catholic writer may be jarring for some. By way of a thought experiment, try reading “Cormac McCarthy” whenever O'Connor says “Catholic writer” in this excerpt from her essay, “Catholic Novelists:”

The universe of **the Catholic fiction writer** is one that is founded on the theological truths of the Faith, but particularly on three of them which are basic—the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment. These are doctrines that the modern secular world does not believe in. It does not believe in sin, or in the value that suffering can have, or in eternal responsibility, and since we live in a world that since the sixteenth century has been increasingly dominated by secular thought, **the Catholic writer** often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it. This means frequently that he may resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience, and the images and actions he creates may seem distorted and exaggerated to the Catholic mind. (MM 185, emphasis added)

To the Catholic mind, this view is not only encouraging, insofar as it confirms his beliefs in the value of suffering and the promise of heaven, but also unsettling. How can O'Connor say that a Catholic author is rooted in the redemption yet simultaneously resort to violence? How is this approach consistent with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and most of all, love? Speaking of the theological virtues, why does O'Connor emphasize the fall, redemption, and judgment over faith, hope, and love, which as St. Paul says, are the three things, especially love, that will last? (cf. 1 Cor. 13:13). For one thing, the narrative structure of at least some sort of “fall, redemption, and judgment” seems much

more directly applicable to both O'Connor's and McCarthy's novels—as well as hosts of other Catholic literature—than faith, hope, and love. There is a hint to these questions' answers, however, in the fact that O'Connor refers to the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgment as the theological truths of Faith, the first of the theological virtues.

Let us employ Dana Gioia's three degrees of Catholic literature, which we discuss in more depth in the final interchapter of this dissertation, to determine McCarthy's identity as a Catholic writer. Cormac McCarthy was born and presumably baptized as Charles McCarthy in Rhode Island, 1933.⁴⁴ By at least the time he was writing as a college student at the University of Tennessee, it seems he was no longer a practicing Catholic, so he does not exemplify Gioia's first degree. Gioia's description of the third degree of Catholic authors—"anti-Catholic Catholics, writers who have broken with the Church but remain obsessed with its failings and injustices, both genuine and imagined" (6)—does not seem to be Cormac's literary *modus operandi* either. It is the second degree—what Gioia calls "cultural Catholics"—that best describes McCarthy's literary Catholicism. McCarthy's world is Catholic, at least insofar as he was raised Catholic and attended Catholic High School in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Once we understand that the act of faith is both human and divine, we can better understand the limits of literary interpretation, which in a sense mirrors the universality of the Catholic faith. The Catechism says, "All men are called to this catholic unity of the People of God," and that *to* this catholic unity "in different ways, belong or are ordered:

⁴⁴ The fact that Cormac McCarthy's record of baptism is so difficult to locate—unlike that of our other three authors—seems to reflect Mr. McCarthy's own dismissive attitude toward the influence of his Catholicism on his writing as well as his general penchant for privacy.

the Catholic faithful, others who believe in Christ, and finally all mankind, called by God's grace to salvation” (836). The Catechism explains further the belief that St.

Augustine refers to as the “Visible Church:”

Fully incorporated into the society of the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who—by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion—are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. Even though incorporated into the Church, one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved. He remains indeed in the bosom of the Church, but “in body” not “in heart.” (837)⁴⁵

Note the harrowing reality of this last qualification—“one who does not however persevere in charity is not saved.” Contrary to the “once saved, always saved” doctrine of Protestantism, the Catholic Church understands that the work of salvation must continually be *worked* out in the hearts and minds of those being saved. Although Christ completed his work of redemption by his death and resurrection, each of us—even and especially within the Visible Church—who have been redeemed, must persevere in grace to be saved.

The Church recognizes, in particular, her relationship with various protestant ecclesial communities and Orthodox Churches:

The Church knows that she is joined in many ways to the baptized who are honored by the name of Christian, but do not profess the Catholic faith in its entirety or have not preserved unity or communion under the successor of Peter. Those “who believe in Christ and have been properly baptized are put in a certain, although imperfect, communion with the Catholic Church.” With the Orthodox

⁴⁵ Augustine writes in *City of God* that the “earthly city” is incapable of true love insofar as it “glories in itself,” but “in the Heavenly City, on the other hand, man’s only wisdom is the devotion which rightly worships the true God, and looks for its reward in the fellowship of the saints, not only holy men but also holy angels, ‘so that God may be all in all’” (14.28; 594).

Churches, this communion is so profound “that it lacks little to attain the fullness that would permit a common celebration of the Lord’s Eucharist.” (838)

This paradigm for Catholicism as both universal and unifying extends to Catholic literature and Catholic literary theory. Gioia says, “There is no singular and uniform Catholic worldview, but nevertheless it is possible to describe some general characteristics that encompass both the fruitful and the renegade among the literati” (26). One of the general characteristics that Gioia indicates is that “Catholics perceive suffering as redemptive, at least when borne in emulation of Christ’s passion and death” (26). The second part of this description—the connection to Christ’s suffering—is crucial. In fact the direct corollary to this general characteristic is that suffering, by itself, without the Divine Mystery is utterly cruel and meaningless. If we do not, as St. Paul says, “complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church,” (Col. 1:24) then suffering ultimately has no value.

The belief in the value of suffering does not, however, necessarily require the individual sufferer to realize his suffering has redemptive value in order for it to take effect. In this way, the Catholic Church stands as a mediator between the Divine Mystery and each human individual—not only for its formal members but also for the entire world. Likewise, Catholic literature is not by, for, and about Catholics only. Gioia explains what happens when one forgets how Catholic literature, in a sense, encompasses all literature. He says, “The greatest misunderstanding of Catholic literature is to classify it solely by its subject matter. Such literalism is not only reductive; it also ignores precisely those spiritual elements that give the best writing its special value” (27). In “Catholic Novelists,” O’Connor anticipates and amplifies Gioia’s observation: “The great

mistake that the unthinking Catholic reader usually makes is to suppose that the Catholic writer is writing to him” (MM 185). O’Connor goes on to explain that sometimes such is the case, but not always and especially, she says, at the time she was writing in the middle of the twentieth century. She notes, “There are signs of a returning interest in the supernatural realities, but there’s just enough of this to provide renewed hope, not yet to provide a working reality strong enough to support fiction for many writers” (186). Over half a century later, Gioia seems to repeat the assessment and prescribe the same diagnosis. Gioia says, “The religious insights [in Catholic literature] usually emerge naturally out of depictions of worldly existence rather than appear to have been imposed intellectually upon the work” (27). O’Connor and Gioia describe in the twentieth and the twenty-first century, respectively, a literary principle, in a sense, that is ongoing, namely “show, don’t tell.” It is this ideal of showing rather than merely telling that Catholicism and literature share. For both O’Connor and Gioia, McCarthy’s *Child of God*, in the broadest of terms, is Catholic at least insofar as it is literary.

It is clear that Cormac McCarthy’s Catholicism influences his writing, as many critics have already observed and argued for it in all of his works, whether they are from his Southern Gothic, western, or post-apocalyptic periods. As Bryan Giemza claims in *Irish Catholic Writers and the Invention of the American South*: “To an attentive reader McCarthy’s Catholicism can be discerned in its varied liturgical, cultural, Irish, and even Joycean registers. Taken together, the plain significance is that McCarthy, so often deemed anti-Catholic, has an unshakably Catholic worldview” (222). Giemza is, in a sense, correct in saying that McCarthy possesses “an unshakably Catholic worldview.” I

would go further and say that McCarthy's Catholicism is so prevalent that it is, or ought to be, apparent to even the *inattentive* reader. Giemza, however, is perhaps mistaken when he puts McCarthy's Catholicism in terms of loyalty and confidently announces that McCarthy is not anti-Catholic.

Giemza seems to argue against himself by describing McCarthy's work as Joycean, and thereby, pro-Catholic. As was discussed at length in the Mary McCarthy section, insofar as an author's Catholicism possesses "Joycean" characteristics, it is, more likely, anti-Catholic, since at the very heart of Joyce's, i.e. Dedalus's, self-creation is the unconditional and complete rejection of the Divine Mystery as creating him. This "total repudiation of the Christian faith" is apostasy; moreover, the rejection of even a single tenant of the faith revealed by and through the Church, is heresy: "the obstinate post-baptismal denial of some truth which must be believed with divine and catholic faith, or it is likewise an obstinate doubt concerning the same" (CCC 2089). Accordingly, although Cormac McCarthy may not be an apostate on the scale that James Joyce and Mary McCarthy are, he has certain marks thereof in the creation of his fictional universe; nevertheless, Joyce and both McCarthys are, in a sense, deeply "Catholic" writers.

Giemza copies a lengthy excerpt from an interview that McCarthy gave in 2011 to reveal his Catholic upbringing. McCarthy, himself, also argues in some ways against Giemza's analysis concerning his *pro*-Catholic worldview. Below is the excerpt of the interview as quoted in Giemza's book:

WSJ: You grew up Irish Catholic.

CM: I did, a bit. It wasn't a big issue. We went to church on Sunday. I don't even remember religion ever even being discussed.

WSJ: Is the God that you grew up with in church every Sunday the same God that the man in “The Road” questions and curses?

CM: It may be. I have a great sympathy for the spiritual view of life, and I think that it’s meaningful. But am I a spiritual person? I would like to be. Not that I am thinking about some afterlife that I want to go to, but just in terms of being a better person. I have friends at the Institute. They’re just really bright guys who do really difficult work solving difficult problems, who say, “It’s really more important to be good than it is to be smart.” And I agree it is more important to be good than it is to be smart. That is all I can offer you. (qtd. in Gierza 222)

What McCarthy appears to do here in undermining the necessity of his Catholic faith for the practice of goodness and charity, insofar as he is a baptized Catholic, is to some degree, at least, a heretical rejection of his faith.

At the same time, McCarthy seems to humbly express his good intentions to be “spiritual,” to practice goodness, and especially through his art, beauty. In the same interview with John Jurgenson, McCarthy says, “Someone asked Flannery O’Connor why she wrote, and she said, ‘Because I was good at it.’ And I think that’s the right answer.”⁴⁶ McCarthy is referring to O’Connor’s essay, “The Nature and Aim of Fiction.” She adds, “I felt that this was not thought by the majority to be a high-minded answer; but it was the only answer I could give” (MM 81). O’Connor distinguishes this answer from her qualification as a Catholic writer: “I had not been asked why I write the way I do, but why I write at all; and to that question there is only one legitimate answer” (81). McCarthy’s explicit agreement with O’Connor’s reason for writing in this rare interview shows an aesthetic synergy between the artists, as artists, even though one conscientiously writes as a Catholic while the other does not. O’Connor says so many

⁴⁶ Walker Percy says practically the same thing in his “Self-Interview:” To the question, “How did you happen to become a writer,” Percy answers, “What happened was that I discovered I had a little knack for writing” (77).

times and in so many ways, “When people have told me that because I am a Catholic, I cannot be an artist, I have had to reply, ruefully, that because I am a Catholic, I cannot afford to be less than an artist” (146). When one considers this weight and pressure, in a sense, of being a Catholic artist according to O’Connor, it is understandable that McCarthy would want to remove himself from being seen in the light of having a heavy Catholic influence in his literary creations.

McCarthy’s reticence about sharing the details of his Catholic upbringing makes it difficult to understand precisely the nature of the Catholic influence on his writing. James Emmett Ryan criticizes Giemza for categorizing authors as “Irish” and “Southern” in a “romantic” rather than an “analytical” way (3). According to Ryan, Giemza takes the following mistaken stance: “Like several other writers in this project, McCarthy is doggedly Irish and Catholic whether he likes it or not.” Ryan’s criticism of Giemza’s take on McCarthy’s Catholicism is right but for the wrong reasons. Both Ryan and Giemza seem to think that Catholicism is either merely cultural or merely individualistic. The Catechism formulates the distinctively Catholic paradox: “Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act” (154). This failure to engage both the divine and human aspects concerning the Catholic faith is pervasive in the corpus of critical evaluation of Catholic literature. McCarthy is not Catholic in the same sense that he is Irish, for instance, since his Catholicism is not only about the divine action through baptism but also the human action of responding to grace. He is an agnostic Catholic—like a twenty-first century Binx Bolling, perhaps.

Ballard's Precursors: The Monk and The Underground Man

McCarthy's *Child of God*, like O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Percy's *The Moviegoer*, can and has been considered a novel of the Southern Gothic genre. As with respect to *Wise Blood* and *The Moviegoer*, *Child of God* might be better and more deeply understood according to the tools of Catholic literary theory, and more broadly, what O'Connor referred to as "Christian realism." As has been seen with Binx Bolling, Lester Ballard is also a re-remembering of Dostoevsky's Underground Man—a view several scholars have taken. In *Cormac McCarthy*, Robert L. Jarrett, for instance, says: "First orphan, then necrophile, murderer, and fugitive, the notorious Lester Ballard of *Child of God* (1973) is the first of a series of characters who revitalize the 'underground man' of Dostoevsky" (35). With the traits of the Underground Man in mind, I would like to suggest a brief comparison between Ballard and the protagonist of Matthew Lewis's preeminently European Gothic work, *The Monk*. The diabolical monk Ambrosio and Ballard are, in a sense, both underground men. Ballard has been analyzed in terms of being a child of the Divine Mystery according to the Catholic Christian tradition, through which Ballard can be seen as a paragon of vice and destruction to be inversely followed almost entirely.

Let us first examine the anti-Catholicism of *The Monk*, its protagonist, and its author. I have chosen *The Monk* out of a host of Gothic texts as representative of the European Gothic because *The Monk's* anti-Catholicism—as are its other Gothic features—is particularly graphic. As Robert Miles says in "The 1790s: the effulgence of Gothic," *The Monk* had all of the marks of Gothic literature, but it was also "shockingly

new, because it inverted, parodied, or exaggerated the features it cannibalized” (53). This novelty of *The Monk* especially seems to anticipate the rise of the American Gothic, which according to Eric Savoy, is “first and foremost an innovative and experimental literature” (168). He continues, “Its power comes from dazzling originality and diversity in a series of departures that situate the perverse—as forms, techniques, and themes—*inside* the national mainstream” (168). Matthew Gregory Lewis, the Protestant author of *The Monk*, seems to be misinformed on some of the Catholic background he uses in his novel. Lewis’s evident criticism of Catholicism is made manifest in *The Monk* not so much through what the narrator says but what he does not say.

Lewis voices his condemnation of Catholicism through Lorenzo, who “had long observed with disapprobation the superstition, which governed Madrid’s Inhabitants” (345). Lorenzo feels compelled “to set before the People in glaring colours how enormous were the abuses but too frequently practiced in monasteries” (345). These abuses pervade the novel as if they are characteristic of, instead of abhorrent to, the Catholic monastic life. The most horrific characters are in positions of authority; the exceptionally hypocritical and evil Abbot and Prioress, according to Lewis, represent the essential corruption of Catholicism to the greatest extent by virtue of their offices. Thus, Lewis is able to proffer “innocent” Catholics, such as Antonia and many of the nuns, without undermining his criticism against Catholicism—on the contrary, the reproach is heightened because the innocent are represented as *victims* of an institution that is essentially corrupt.

Lewis intimates that the horrors of superstition, vice, and idolatry are essentially Catholic by falsely depicting their prevalence in the monastery. For instance, contrary to Lewis's portrayal, the Church has never allowed for the adoration of Mary as an idol, as Ambrosio does: "With what fervor Ambrosio addresses his prayers to the insensible Image" of the Madonna (80). Catholicism, however, does greatly honor the saints, especially the Mother of the Divine Mystery, as beautiful examples of faithfulness. One such example of Marian devotion can be seen in *The Joy of the Gospel*, an apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis published in 2014. Following the tradition of ending papal documents with a prayer for Mary's intercession, Pope Francis sings this praise to Mary at its close:

Virgin of listening and contemplation,
Mother of love, Bride of the eternal wedding feast,
pray for the Church, whose pure icon you are,
that she may never be closed in on herself
or lose her passion for establishing God's kingdom. (212)

In contrast with this true devotion to the Mother of love, Ambrosio blasphemously makes love to Matilda, whom he discovers to be the model for the portrait of the Virgin Mary that takes his fancy. Lewis sardonically stresses his disdain for Catholic monasticism by having the narrator note that Ambrosio "adhered strictly to every rule of his order save Chastity" (227), thus implying that all "monkish virtues," and even religious life as a whole, spell disaster for the soul. The narration suggests that if monastic vows and discipline communicated grace, then Ambrosio, their faithful practitioner, would certainly not have fallen.⁴⁷ Ambrosio, who long was seen as an ideal monk, descends so

⁴⁷ Lewis's disdain for Catholic works reflects the common Protestant *sola fide* argument against Catholics, and more specifically is reminiscent of David Hume's aspersion of

low into the depths of despair, as if he had not received the gift of faith in any real way, in the first place. The massive collapse of the convent at the end of the story—another Gothic trope—again suggests, in the case of *The Monk*, that the best way to get rid of the evils that occur in the monastery is to dispense with the monastic order altogether.

McCarthy's *Child of God* does not display such blatant anti-Catholicism. The classic distinction between “terror” and “horror” illuminates some of the difference between *The Monk*'s and *Child of God*'s aesthetic appeal as well as their anti-Catholicism. Lewis does a fair job of describing the psychological decline of Ambrosio after he chooses to live in his sin, but his moral failure and demonic end are rather inconsistent with the description of him as the an abbot renowned for his virtue. It is, in many ways, a “horror thriller,” rather than a psychologically profound masterpiece, due to a lack of subtlety. Although Ambrosio's story to some extent reflects Jesus' parable of the virtuous man whose good works are forgotten because he turns from virtue, part of the message of Christ's parable is that the truly virtuous man would not turn from virtue so easily. Considered philosophically, virtue becomes easier as a person performs it, due to *connatural*ity, as Aristotle calls it. The depiction of Ballard's wretched life of sin and degradation is more believable, even as his deeds are as or even more horrific than those of Ambrosio.

In any case, both Ambrosio and Ballard exemplify not so much the pattern of Aristotelian *connatural*ity, but rather its inverse, what we might call *conunnatural*ity.

“monkish virtues” described in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*. Hume includes among these vicious virtues celibacy, penance, self-denial, humility, and solitude (270), all of which Ambrosio supposedly practices on a daily basis.

Pope John Paul II describes the psychological and spiritual characteristics that accompany such moral decay. In *Love and Responsibility*, he says that although freedom is very important, it must proceed from truth in order to be authentic. Thus, the book's very first sentence is "the world in which we live consists of many objects" (3). Although *Love and Responsibility* simultaneously emphasizes the subjectivity of the human person, which in itself is good, the author's simple statement concerning objective reality begins the work. According to John Paul II, the idea that something is "true for me" but perhaps "not true for you" points to the fact that people have different beliefs, not that there is no objective reality or access to the truth. Saying "such-and-such is true for me" is simply a way of saying "I believe such-and-such." Pope John Paul II expands upon the philosophical tradition that insists that individual belief—the freedom to choose what one believes—is a goal that must first recognize "what is that which is."

Notwithstanding *The Monk's* lack of aesthetic subtlety—not to mention its unwarranted propaganda against *ascetic* discipline—especially compared to the psychological and spiritual intricacies of *Child of God*, Lewis's famous European Gothic novel still roughly depicts the moral decline that the vicious man generally follows. With the successive steps, I have suggested loosely how both Ambrosio and Ballard follow the pattern of what we are calling "*conunnatural*:"

1. **Initial turning-away from the good**—Ambrosio has sex with Rosario/Matilda/Satan; Ballard masturbates on a car fender near Frog Mountain while watching the boy and girl have sex. In both cases, the protagonist's perversity has deeper roots than the scene displays, but these

events are good starting points, since thus far, the agency of each protagonist remains in tact, at least to a certain extent.

2. **Continued obstinacy**—Ambrosio continues to lust after Matilda even while maintaining a virtuous front; Ballard seeks fulfillment through various permutations of his initial perversity.
3. **Presumption**—Since the Divine Mystery is all-merciful, both Ambrosio and Ballard think they will escape divine justice even as they intensify the gravity of their sins. This stage is marked by a lessening of guilt even as the sin increases.
4. **Positive hatred for the truth**—Even insofar as both Ambrosio and Ballard realize that their sins constitute a full-out rebellion against the Divine Mystery, they persist and escalate their sins. Ambrosio rapes the innocent virgin Antonia. Ballard makes love to the corpses of the women he has murdered and wears their clothes.
5. **Final rejection of love, i.e. despair**—Ambrosio sells his soul to the devil. In Ballard's case, by the time his body is dissected for scientific research, it seems his soul has already undergone a thorough decay.

Both Ambrosio and Ballard are described as going through all of these steps, which in turn, increases the mimetic value of the novels. Insofar as the protagonists accept the premise that *they are always already damned*, the psychology of their demise is believable, or in *The Monk's* case, within the purview of the suspension of disbelief.

Tracking the protagonists' moral decent according to this pattern of *conunnatural* helps us understand how it is possible that both Ambrosio and Ballard become such monsters, such freaks of nature. They seem to live in an alternate universe. They are underground men in the funk hole of their own isolation. In *Notes from the Underground*, the Underground Man goes as far as believing that "two times two equals five" if that is what he has to do to be different. He wonders, "Merciful Heavens! But what do I care for the laws and the fact that twice two makes four?" (63). Sartre, too, seems to share in the Underground Man's solipsistic thinking. In Sartre's fascinatingly intricate "essay in phenomenological ontology," *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes a revolutionary claim in the philosophical world concerning the Divine Mystery and man. He says, "Actually the reality of the possible is uniquely that of divine thought! This means that it has being as thought which has not been realized" (73). For Sartre, the divine *Logos* is not the Source of Being, but rather, its absence. The Divine Mystery is not merely non-existent; he is "Nothingness." Although the veracity of Sartre's claim is rather debatable, its newness, in the context of the philosophical tradition throughout history, is not. Sartre's perception of the Divine Mystery is not a continuation of *apophatic* theology, in which the Divine Mystery is said to be "not" in order to denote his absolute transcendence over all perceptions of reality; rather, Sartre points to a fundamental shift in human thought concerning the deity. It follows from Sartre's existentialism, that with the Divine Mystery as literally No-where and No-thing, the human being replaces him as the Source of Being—since the alternative is for man to possess the nature of Sartre's god, i.e. Nothingness.

Sartre speaks more plainly in *Existentialism is a Humanism* about the radical shift in agency from the Divine Mystery to man. He says, “The doctrine that I am presenting to you: ‘Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life’” (37). This doctrine is indeed startling—not because it presents man as free, creating himself by his own choices (since that has always been understood as a philosophic principle) but that Sartre’s doctrine insists that man is alone—absolutely alone—without another from whom and for whom he derives his being. Christianity, in particular, has always maintained that man possesses a limited yet real freedom. Conditional existentialism fully embraces Sartre’s extravagance concerning man’s phenomenal creativity and freedom; it also recognizes, in a sense, Sartre’s experience of profound isolation, insofar as man chooses to isolate himself. According to Catholic understanding, the consequences of radical individualism stem not from the Divine Mystery’s existence or non-existence, but rather from his faithfulness even when a person chooses his own will over all else. The Divine Mystery himself promises that he will not, and by his own decree cannot, annihilate us because he loves us; only we, through our God-given life and freedom, can seek mutual and self-destruction—as we witness the Underground Man, Ambrosio, and Ballard do.

The Scatology in McCarthy’s Eschatology

McCarthy writes into Ballard a means of interpretation that reflects how the Catholic Church reads and interprets Sacred Scripture. In the introduction of this dissertation, we discuss to some extent “the divine and human natures” of Sacred

Scripture, which informs the incarnational dynamic of each of the novels in this study, but we have not examined the various senses of Scripture in particular. The Catechism says, “According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses” (115). Concerning the “spiritual senses,” we have discerned that Ballard is a kind of “anti-type”—not to say *antetype*—of Christ, which perversely mimics the allegorical sense of Scripture. Ballard’s misadventures also thoroughly engage the “moral sense” of Scripture, insofar as his violence and self-destruction instruct us precisely how *not* to live. Finally, Ballard has, so to speak, an “anagogical sense,” though which, the Catechism says, “we can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland” (117).

McCarthy is certainly not employing the spiritual senses of Scripture in the same way that O’Connor and Percy do, but he does heavily engage them nonetheless in his own culturally Catholic way. According to Catholic literary theory, this incorporation adds to the value of McCarthy’s work whether or not the author personally believes in the reality of what he is saying. In “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” O’Connor delineates all four senses of Scripture and says, “Although this was a method applied to biblical exegesis, it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities” (72-73). O’Connor believes so strongly in this particularly Catholic vision of fiction writing that she says, “I think that it is this enlarged view of the human scene that the fiction writer has to cultivate if he is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of literature” (73). In other words, even if

authors, such as McCarthy, personally reject the richness of their Catholicism, the value of their art does not suffer, but rather exponentially increases, because of it.

McCarthy, who later in his career specifically partakes in the post-apocalyptic genre with his novel *The Road*, is already highly invested in the anagogical sense of Scripture in *Child of God*. Another name for the “anagogical sense” (Gr: *anagoge* ‘leading’) is the “eschatological sense” (Gr: *eschaton* ‘last’). Christian eschatology promises redemption. As St. Paul says, “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). For Lester Ballard, however, the “eschatological sense” might be more aptly named the “scatological sense.” Both senses promise that “everything will work out in the end,” but in very different ways. The “scatological sense” of *Child of God* is immediately and consistently present in the narration. McCarthy plays with the literal and figurative meanings of the word “squatting,” especially at the beginning of the novel, to help bring the scatological to the fore. In the beginning, we learn that Ballard is “squatting” on the land that the auctioneer is trying to sell. The auctioneer, too, is described as “*squatting* on the tailboard of the truck” (7, emphasis added) as he talks to Ballard. The third chapter begins, “Fred Kirby was *squatting* in his front yard next to the watertap where he used to sit all the time when Ballard came by” (10, emphasis added). The following chapter begins with the narration of Ballard responding to the call of nature: he “trod a clearing in the clumps of jimson and nightshade and *squatted* and shat” (13, emphasis added). Ballard again squats again near the end of the novel, just before trying to kill John Greer (who is incidentally digging a septic tank): “Squatting there he let his head drop between

his knees and he began to cry” (170). Unlike Christ, who weeps for his brother Lazarus who is dead and lain in a tomb (cf. John 11), Ballard weeps because of the meanness, death, and destruction that he himself perpetuates. The narrator continues the perverse echo at the end the chapter by comparing Ballard’s descent into town to Christ’s riding into Jerusalem: “He had resolved himself to ride on for he could not turn back and the world that day was as lovely as any day that ever was and he was riding to his death” (171). The act of squatting, for Ballard, forms a kind of motif that seems to signify our human status not as illustrious children of the Divine Mystery but rather as being small offspring of an unknown deity.

Similarly to how the Catholic understanding of the allegorical or Christological sense of Scripture influences its understanding of the eschatological sense of Scripture, the violent “incarnation” of Ballard’s lusts bear on the “scatological sense” of Ballard’s story. Ballard’s literal descent into the cave after the house he was using burns to the ground suggests his figurative moral descent. The drama of the descent hinges upon his proposed status as a “child of God,” an appellation that—as one of the novel’s narrators suggest—in some sense applies to all of us, and preeminently to Christ, who is “the only begotten Son of God” (cf. John 3:16). In *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction*, Gary M. Ciuba presents a thirty-five page section entitled “McCarthy’s *Enfant Terrible*: Incarnating Sacred Violence in *Child of God*.” In Ciuba’s essay on the *Child of God*, there is barely any mention of the incarnation even though the word is in the title. Instead, Ciuba prefers the term “mimetic desire,” which he uses to describe Ballard’s perverse desire for and relationship to his earthly father, who commits suicide

when Ballard was just a boy. Ciuba relies heavily on the philosopher and literary critic René Girard, who uses the idea of “mimetic desire” as foundational to his way of viewing reality. Describing Girard’s concept, Ciuba says, “Girard posits a compelling sense of unfulfillment at the center of the subject” (7). Ciuba says that according to this unfulfillment, the dynamic of mimetic desire, “The self desires according to that other rather than itself, wants what another wants—love, power, wealth, celebrity, success, godhead—because the other wants it” (7). Traditional Christianity does not describe what Girard and Ciuba call “mimetic desire” as “incarnation,” but rather as “concupiscence,” which the Catholic Catechism defines as “the movement of the sensitive appetite contrary to the operation of reason.” Drawing from Sacred Scripture, the Catechism says, “The apostle St. Paul identifies it with the rebellion of the ‘flesh’ against ‘spirit.’ Concupiscence stems from the disobedience of the first sin. It unsettles man’s moral faculties and, without being in itself an offense, inclines man to commit sins” (2515).

For Girard and Ciuba, the incarnation is not something that the Divine Mystery did for us, but rather, a powerful idea that we made up about the Divine Mystery, who is also an idea we made up in order to discuss human psychology and violence. Lacking a belief in original sin and the incarnation, Girard and Ciuba characterize chaos within man futilely striving for order and restraint as the only “incarnation.” This overarching and never-ending human desperation is forever fueled by “mimetic desire.” Since, for them, the Divine Mystery has not taken on flesh, man assumes godhead only, and ineluctably, to meet the common fate of all men, either by his own hand or by another. Ciuba, thus, characterizes Ballard not as an agent capable of being converted through divine grace

(since for Ciuba, no such reality exists); rather, Ciuba sees Ballard as an irredeemable, embodied violence that “can always erupt in some new Girardian deity run amok” (199). In contrast to Ciuba’s idea of the incarnation, the glossary of the Catechism defines incarnation as “the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature and became man in order to accomplish our salvation in that same human nature. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is both true God and true man, not part God and part man” (883). There are, of course, other definitions of incarnation, but from the Catholic perspective, all other definitions in some way or another refer back to this one.

It is with this understanding of the Divine Mystery’s creative, redemptive, and sanctifying acts that the Catholic Church teaches the philosophical principle of the *hierarchy of being*. Accordingly, humans are seen as being over all of the Divine Mystery’s creation, although the angels are, in a sense, greater than humans. The age of rationalism often referred to the hierarchy of being as “The Great Chain of Being.” In *Essay on Man*, the Catholic poet, Alexander Pope, refers to this chain, saying, “What would this man? Now upward will he soar, / And little less than angel, would be more” (VI, 1-2). When Pope lists the hierarchy of being in the next stanza, however, note that he places *man* and *human* above and below *angel*—an incarnational intimation: “Vast chain of being, which from God began, / Natures ethereal, human, angel, man, / Beast, bird, fish, insect! what no eye can see, / No glass can reach! from infinite to thee” (VIII, 5-8). The Great Chain of Being proceeds ontologically as follows, and Ballard’s fall into abnormality and animality would remain perverse in a world where the Divine Mystery had not walked:

The Divine Mystery

Angels

Man

Animals

Vegetation

Minerals

Yet insofar as the Divine Mystery condescended to become man, not angel, in Jesus Christ, the chain becomes thus, and Ballard's fall is exponentially expanded:

The Divine Mystery

Man

Angels

Animals

Vegetation

Minerals

Ballard, in his grasping for divinity, falls lower than the angels, animals, and in a sense, lower than the food they eat. According to Catholic theology, Jesus does not possess an angelic nature. He is a man, yet as the Divine Mystery, he also comprehends and holds all things in existence. St. Thomas Aquinas says, "We know [God's] relationship with creatures, that is, that He is the cause of all things; also that creatures differ from Him inasmuch as He is not in any way part of what is caused by Him" (94, Q. 12, A. 12). Lest this statement gives the impression that the Divine Mystery is not simultaneously

intimately concerned with and for his creation, Aquinas adds, “His effects are removed from Him, not by reason of any defect on His part, but because He superexceeds them all” (94, Q. 12, A. 12). As John Paul II says, “Love itself is disposed toward objective value” (*Love* 137).

Ballard’s attempts at control are simultaneously blasphemous and ridiculous. His condescension, unlike the Divine Mystery’s, ends up not raising humanity but merely lowering himself. In Ballard’s fallen subjectivity, however, the hierarchy of being becomes:

~~The Divine Mystery~~ **Ballard**

—————
~~Angels~~ (Excrement)

Minerals

Vegetation

Animals

Man

By putting his own base needs and desires as the highest priority, Ballard becomes, in a sense, a misanthrope. At its height, Ballard kills without thinking—violence is merely the natural thing to do. John Paul II refers to this inversion of the hierarchy of being as the “subjectivism of value.” Due to concupiscence, the wound of original sin, emotional subjectivism can become for an individual indistinguishable from reality. John Paul II says, “From this shape of subjectivism, from subjectivism of affections, a straight and easy path leads to *subjectivism of value*, so easy that there simply seems to be no way or reason for not following it once one has already entered the sloping place of

subjectivism” (137). It is worth reiterating John Paul’s distinction between *subjectivity*, which refers to the limitations of individual perspective, and *subjectivism*, which tends toward replacing objective reality with one’s subjectivity. Subjectivism, in other words, tries to be what only the Divine Mystery is, namely, the Source of Being.

Ballard’s perverse vision of a completely inverted principle of hierarchy is graphically foreshadowed near the beginning of the novel, when Ballard secretly gazes at the boy and the girl copulating in the car. Looking on, Ballard “spends” himself, while the girl cries out: “O Bobby, O god, O shit” (20). When Ballard again finds two lovers in a car near Frog Mountain—this time they are both dead—he is able to take the man’s place on top of the girl. Now in his godless universe, Ballard can, and therefore does, take possession of the female body—a gesture of his human nature taking on divinity without the Divine Mystery. Thus begins Ballard’s “condescension” into the realm of the dead with the dead man “staring up with one eye open and one half shut,” watching Ballard defile himself (88). The three of them are dead in their own way; they are a perverse trinity, “moviegoers” of a profane beatific vision.

The horror of Ballard’s actions is held in sharp contrast with the Catholic vision of the universe, which believes that the impotence and malevolence of deistic voyeurism is not, in the final analysis, the true *telos* of the human condition. Catholicism says that the Divine Mystery’s separateness from his creation has nothing to do with neglect of or disdain for his creation; on the contrary, the Divine Mystery says about his creation, “It is good” (cf. Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25). The writer of Genesis says, moreover, that after the Divine Mystery created man, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it

was very good” (Gen. 1:31). According to this Catholic realism, the Divine Mystery paradoxically remains completely intimate and involved with that which he is infinitely greater; indeed, he is the very life of all that he has created. This divine revelation, made manifest through the Mystery of the Incarnation, is utterly unique in human thought. As Romano Guardini puts it: “The absolute essences of ancient philosophy were enmeshed forever within the totality of being to which they gave stability and eternity. But the Christian God needs no world in order that He might be; subsisting alone He is sufficient unto Himself” (24). Guardini expresses eloquently the nub of the Catholic belief pertaining to both human creation and divine freedom when he says, “The world was created out of nothing by the freedom of the Almighty Whose commanding Word gives to all things being and nature” (24). According to the belief, the Divine Mystery’s freedom with respect to creating man, male and female, in his image and likeness does not oppose but rather facilitates human freedom.

The good news of *Child of God* is that Ballard’s backwardness does not have the final word. Commenting on the eschatological sense of Sacred Scripture, the Catechism says, “The Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem” (117). Accordingly, the seven sacraments of the Church ensure that Ballard’s seven unearthed bodies, witnesses of and to Ballard’s atrocities, are ultimately not under Ballard’s Satanic control.⁴⁸ Explaining the *already/not yet* nature of the Catholic Church, the Catechism says:

⁴⁸The number of bodies that Ballard buries alludes to the very means by which Scripture says we are “children of God.” As the Catholic Biblical scholar Scott Hahn says, “The Sabbath is the seventh day, and the Hebrew word for ‘seven’ is sheba. Yet sheba stands not only for a number. Sheba is also a verb, and it means to swear a covenant oath—literally, to ‘seven oneself’” (First 54).

Finally, the church has an eschatological significance. To enter into the house of God, we must cross a threshold, which symbolizes passing from the world wounded by sin to the world of the new Life to which all men are called. The visible church is a symbol of the Father's house toward which the People of God is journeying and where the Father "will wipe every tear from their eyes." Also for this reason, the Church is the house of *all* God's children, open and welcoming. (1186)

According to Catholic literary theory, the apparition of the mutilated Ballard is quite far from the image we are made to be: "A weedshaped onearmed human swaddled in outsized overalls and covered all over with red mud" (192). For those who have embraced their identity as children of the Divine Mystery and live according to his fatherly promises, the sins of our fathers will not hold eternal sway over our fates. This vision of reality declares that, in the final analysis, the *martyrs* (L: witnesses) of and to the Divine Mystery's Incarnation will triumph in the end: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God..." (John 1:1).

Interchapter Zero: Catholic Literature Now & Beyond

"We don't have a Catholic literature in the sense that we have a group of writers gathered around a central motivating proposition, or a leader, but we do have something in that there are a very respectable number of good poets who are Catholics...who are sitting in their own places writing good poetry."

~ Flannery O'Connor, *Habit of Being* (355)

Catholics constitute about a fifth of the American population with over sixty-nine million members (Grammich 5). Considering the number of Catholics in America and the historical significance of the Catholic Church in the development of Western Civilization as a whole, one may wonder why Catholicism is strikingly absent, or else derided, in many of our textbooks. In "The Catholic Writer Today," the poet and critic, Dana Gioia, expresses this "cultural conundrum" that has haunted him for years: "Stated simply, the

paradox is that, although Roman Catholicism constitutes the largest religious and cultural group in the United States, Catholicism currently enjoys almost no positive presence in the American fine arts—not in literature, music, sculpture, or painting” (1). Gioia believes that this trend is not just a bit of fascinating demographic trivia, but more importantly, Gioia wonders at the lack of awareness and concern for how this trend impacts cultural vitality. Focusing on imaginative literature—fiction, poetry, drama, and memoir—in America, he states, “There seems to be a tacit agreement on both sides that, in practice, if not in theory, Catholicism and art no longer mix—a consensus that would have surprised not only Dante but also Jack Kerouac” (1). For Gioia, the central question that emerges is twofold: “What is Catholic literature, and what makes an author a Catholic writer?” (1).

Gioia is not the only contemporary literary critic or artist who has wondered about this apparent disappearance of Catholicism in the literary arts. In *Beauteous Truth*, Joseph Pearce says, “It is somehow assumed by moderns that the beliefs of Christians, or even the more generic belief in God, are somehow superstitious and that such beliefs fly in the face of ‘reason’” (13). Like Gioia, Pearce perceives the claim that Catholic beliefs are irrational as a convenient means for some to ignore believers and exclude them from academic discourse. Pearce contends that the trend is “decidedly odd for, as Chesterton reminds us, the Catholic Church is the ‘one continuous intelligent institution that has been thinking about thinking for two thousand years’” (13).⁴⁹ In addition to Chesterton’s

⁴⁹ The Catholic apologist, G. K. Chesterton, continues his vindication of the Catholic intellectual tradition by emphasizing the Church’s acknowledgment of and love for both mystical and empirical reality. He says, “Catholicism is not mere mysticism; it is even

observation, Pearce says that the Catholic Church is also an institution that has consistently thought about *thinkers* throughout her history. Chesterton, Gioia, and Pearce all agree that celebrating exemplary Catholic writers of the past is crucial for any attempt to revive Catholic literary life in America today.

This celebration of the past alone, however, will not bring about a Catholic revival in the arts. The Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, “Man is not giving thanks properly when he freezes, as it were, in the act of looking backward in reverent thanksgiving. No, he must show that he has understood God’s gesture of gift-giving by taking it over and becoming a giver” (*Mary* 129). Even as I repeat the names of Chesterton, Gioia, and Pearce, I am humbled by the thought that I am participating in this catholic dialogue, as I am sure, they were humbled before me. Like Robert Payne, who says in his introduction to his book *Hubris: A Study of Pride*, “I wish Charles Williams had written the book” (2). Indeed, any one of the Inklings would have done a better job than I have done here.⁵⁰ O’Connor says, “We hear a great deal about humility being required to lower oneself, but it requires an equal humility and a real love of the truth to raise oneself and by hard labor to acquire higher standards” (MM 189). Although O’Connor writes this to her fellow Catholic artists, in particular, her admonition applies just as well—if not more—to the Catholic critic.

now defending human reason against the mere mysticism of the Pragmatists” (CW 131). Consequently, superstition is not a function of Catholic belief but of modern materialism.

⁵⁰ The most famous members of this informal literary group, which especially encouraged the writing of fantasy, were J.R.R Tolkien and C.S. Lewis.

Some critics think, in opposition to Gioia, Pearce, or the like-minded Ralph McInery, that there is no decline in Catholic literary influence—either imaginative or critical. In an interview with the Catholic writer, Gregory Wolfe, entitled “Postmodernism, Vodka, and Catholic Letters,” Wolfe pushes against what he calls “the decline and fall of Catholic literature argument” (1). Specifically addressing Gioia, whom he calls his friend, Wolfe admonishes, “Take off the blinders and look around. There’s a lot of good work out here that needs your critical engagement and thus support. Writers are starving in garrets. Let’s give them a meal” (1). Wolfe reminds the “declinists” that literature is often not well received at the time of publication: “Does anyone actually know what the Catholic press said about Flannery O’Connor when her books were first appearing? From what little I’ve seen, it wasn’t pretty” (1). O’Connor herself, who refers to how poorly her works were received, even by her Catholic mother, Regina, seems to anticipate Wolfe’s remarks. For instance, a year after the publication of *Wise Blood* in 1952, Joe Lee Davis says that Erskine Caldwell’s “naturalistic farce” controls the writing of the novel and says, “Miss O’Connor’s skill is not yet that mature, although it makes a good run for the money. Her farce gets in the way of her satire and will not support the full implications of her allegory” (325). Davis predicts that O’Connor’s literary influence will not last for long. As for Regina’s response to her literature, O’Connor writes to Robert Lowell, “I have been taking painting myself, painting mostly chickens and guineas and pheasants. My mother thinks they’re great stuff. She prefers me painting to me writing” (HB 35).

Often, the negative reception of O'Connor's work from Catholics was due to the ambiguity that true art necessarily entails. In *Writing against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor*, Joanne Halleran McMullen suggests that due to O'Connor's adherence to the laws of fiction, "readers are often compelled into a non-Catholic, and yes, sometimes even an anti-Catholic reading of her fiction" (8). O'Connor's fiction does not permit didactic, sermonizing bombast to have its way with the reader and, in turn, it allows for various and sundried interpretations, even if those interpretations are contrary to O'Connor's more-or-less explicitly expressed motives outside her fiction. McMullen goes on to say that "the characters and actions shown [in O'Connor's fiction] argue their own point, often turning in an ironic reversal against the author" (8). This "ironic reversal against" O'Connor, however, must also be seen as an ironic reversal against the characters that oppose her, since the characters are thus imbued with human life through their symbolic action that is both their own and that of their creator. This mise-en-abyme is reflected indefinitely in both directions as mirrors facing each other. The same phenomenon occurs in Percy's fiction as well as that of Cormac McCarthy and Mary McCarthy.

Some claim that there are also more recent Catholic literary stars on the rise. In the introduction to *The Best Catholic Writing 2004*, Brian Doyle optimistically proclaims, "There is a remarkable amount of fine writing published every year in Catholic magazines and newspapers and journals and reviews and Web sites and books" (xiii). Doyle goes further, suggesting, "The next time somebody tells you there is a dearth of fine writing in the Catholic press, I suggest you snort so hard your spectacles fly into the

next room” (xiii). With respect to the question “what is Catholic literature?” Doyle indicates that it includes literature “by Catholics, for Catholics, and of Catholics,” but does not require all or even any of the three, necessarily, to be Catholic, since “Catholic writing is also delightfully, miraculously, catholic” (xviii). He adds, “To limit a collection such as this to only material that specifically concerns churchiana would be a mule-headed mistake, for the essence and joy and struggle of Catholicism is to grapple with the largest questions of human existence” (xiv). According to Doyle, O’Connor is representative of this kind of literature, since her stories are generally not “of Catholics.”

Although Doyle and Wolfe’s opinion of all literature as “catholic” (Gr: καθολικός) seems more in keeping with O’Connor’s own expansive view, Gioia likewise does not ultimately preclude any (good) literature from the realm of Catholicism. The problem with conceptualizing all literature as equally “catholic,” however, is that at some point it seems to become a useless designation. Thus, Gioia describes Catholic literature qualitatively, saying that there are “at least three degrees of literary Catholicism” (5). The first degree seems to be the most straightforward—“writers who are practicing Catholics and remain active in the Church” (5). The second degree includes what Gioia calls “cultural Catholics”—“writers who were raised in the faith and often educated in Catholic schools” (5). Finally, Gioia describes the third degree as “anti-Catholic Catholics, writers who have broken with the Church but remain obsessed with its failings and injustices, both genuine and imagined” (6). Implementing his conceptual framework, this dissertation addresses all three degrees of Catholic novelists: Flannery O’Connor and

Walker Percy can both be considered of the first degree, Cormac McCarthy as of the second, and Mary McCarthy as of the third.

On Being Drawn: Some Final Thoughts

“O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!”

~Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Prologue, lines 1-4

The novelist *draws* her characters, or in the passive voice, the characters are *being drawn*. The double meaning of this statement expresses the conditional existentialism of Catholic literary theory well. Insofar as the Divine Mystery *draws* us, as the artist draws a portrait, the act of creating through art seems to be, as Sartre puts it, “limited only by the divine freedom” (*Literary* 196). The portrait being drawn is only and exactly that which the artist chooses. Insofar as the Divine Mystery does not force us, however, but rather *draws* us, as water *draws* a thirsty person to drink, there is room for human freedom. As strange as it may seem, a thirsty person may choose *not* to drink, or he may choose to drink. He may even drink conscientiously, with an awareness and gratitude for that which he did nothing to create. The characters that O’Connor, Percy, and the McCarthys have drawn in the novels we have examined have sometimes been aware of their being drawn by something or someone greater than themselves. Most of the time, however, they have acted without such awareness. Often, they have irrationally chosen to do that which clearly harmed themselves and others.

Anthony Burgess, whose own tumultuous childhood was Catholic, contends in the 2010 introduction to his controversial work of fiction, *A Clockwork Orange*, that the original 1962 American publication, which did not include the final chapter, is not “a fair picture of human life.” He explains using a rather Catholic understanding of the universe:

By definition, a human being is endowed with free will. He can use this to choose between good and evil. If he can only perform good or only perform evil, then he is a clockwork orange—meaning that he has the appearance of an organism lovely with colour and juice but is in fact only a clockwork toy to be wound up by God or the Devil or (since this is increasingly replacing both) the Almighty State. (xiii)

Burgess does not mean that it is inhuman to be only good or only evil but that it is inhuman to be *able* to only do good or only do evil. Indeed, in the mind of every evil person is the dark optimism that he can do no wrong.

Affirming the Catholic belief concerning sin and grace in a General Audience, Pope Benedict XVI says, “Faith tells us that there are not two principles, one good and one evil, but only one principle, the creator God, and this principle is good, only good, without a shadow of evil” (6). Benedict is not denying the reality of evil but that evil does not come from the Divine Mystery: “Evil does not come from the source of being itself, it is not equally primal. Evil comes from a freedom created, from a freedom abused” (6). Furthermore, both Jesus and his mother are fully human, yet entirely without sin. They did not commit evil, but they most certainly suffered it. At the same time, both Jesus, as the Son of the Divine Mystery, and Mary, as the Mother of the Divine Mystery, in a sense, transcend humanity. Burgess says that “life is sustained by the grinding opposition of moral entities” (xiii), but this is not to say that evil is equal to goodness, although it may often seem even more powerful.

The Divine Mystery and goodness always triumph over evil in the final analysis. That is why, as St. Josemaría Escrivá observes, “The Lord wants his children, those of us who have received the gift of faith, to proclaim the original optimistic view of creation, the love for the world which is at the heart of the Christian message” (703).⁵¹ This optimism, nevertheless, has with it a kind of pessimism, too. The aesthetic monition of Henry James seems appropriate here: “Do not think too much about optimism and pessimism; try and catch the colour of life” (Art 869). O’Connor says something quite similar to Burgess’s statement above. She reminds the critic, especially the Catholic critic, that a novelist “does not write about general beliefs but about men with free will, and that there is nothing in our faith that implies a foregone optimism for man so free that with his last breath he can say *No*” (MM 182). For novelists who do not believe in the Divine Mystery, such as Mary McCarthy and Cormac McCarthy, the same aesthetic rules with respect to human freedom apply. Novelists, *qua* novelists, must write about free persons, since ultimately—and paradoxically, the more this reality is apparently obscured, the clearer it finally becomes—the human person is free.

Similar to how both Percy and O’Connor continually remind us, Burgess refers to the reality of original sin, which both confirms and fundamentally opposes human freedom. According to the Catholic perspective, we are made in the Divine Mystery’s image, but we have not yet fully embraced this reality. We have chosen something else.

⁵¹ In the same vein, St. Escrivá says, “Christian optimism is not a sugary optimism; nor is it a mere human confidence that everything will turn out all right. It is an optimism that sinks its roots in an awareness of our freedom, and in the sure knowledge of the power of grace. It is an optimism which leads us to make demands on ourselves, to struggle to respond at every moment to God’s calls” (659).

Burgess explains, “Unfortunately there is so much original sin in us all that we find evil rather attractive. To devastate is easier and more spectacular than to create” (xiv).

Burgess describes the strange but real dynamic, by which man, who is created good, may choose to do and to become evil. St. Paul writes that the Divine Mystery brings good out of evil through the mystery of divine grace: “We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him” (Rom. 8:28). The human being, on the other hand, has the capacity to do the opposite. Paul continues, “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). The Divine Mystery invites us to *divine filiation*, to become sons in the Son, but man, through the mystery of his sinfulness, has reversed the dignity of being created in the Divine Mystery’s image. He has brought evil out of good. What is distinct about literary creation is its shared limitation with its author. Whereas the Divine Mystery is absolutely infinite, and his creation is precisely that which he intends to create, human art imperfectly, even perversely, imitates the essential perfection of the Divine Mystery. The human author has relatively limited control over what he creates and what those for whom he creates understand.

Burgess describes the human propensity toward sin humorously but not in order to eclipse the horror of it. He says, “We like to have the pants scared off us by visions of cosmic destruction. To sit down in a dull room and compose *Missa Solemnis* or *The Anatomy of Melancholy* does not make headlines” (xiv). Thus, cosmic destruction also becomes, in a sense, *comic* destruction. What is strangest of all about individual and societal moral decay is that it often does not feel like one is becoming evil. At the height

of dramatic irony, the character does not know that he is doing the very things that lead to his own destruction. In fact, sin for sinful, irrational man very regularly feels like the right thing to do. No matter how natural sin feels, however, it remains unnatural. Vernon J. Bourke translates Augustine as saying, “Sin for man is a disorder or perversion: that is, a turning away (*aversio*) from the most worthy Creator and a turning toward (*conversio*) the inferior things that He created” (*Essential Augustine*, 45). Bourke’s parentheticals are helpful here, since they indicate the infernal inversion of the sinful action. Generally, we speak about one *converting* from sinfulness to righteousness and having an *aversion* toward sin, but as Augustine’s Latin indicates, we also have the capacity to convert to *inferiora* (L: lower things) and in this *conversion* to sin have a profound *aversion* toward the Divine Mystery. We can see and taste and smell sin right now, so we do all that we can to avoid the Divine Mystery, for whom and—to use Milton’s angelic pun—upon whom, we must wait.

This sinful transfiguration does not have to be dramatic or crude. In fact, it is the subtle sinfulness of complacency or the prodigality of false humility that most often destroys us. In *Heart of the World*, Hans Urs von Balthasar describes sloth or pride, whichever you will, in so many words through his narrator:

Somewhere there exists a bright image of me, an image of what I could have been, of what I am still (but how?) capable of becoming. But these “ghostly hours” recur more and more seldom, and the enveloping layers of everyday life grow stronger and thicker around me, and gradually the husk turns to flesh and the flesh turns to husk. I seal myself off to God and this becomes my usual state—my second nature. (94)

The specific means by which we get to heaven is important; how we get to hell, not so much. Oscar Wilde once quipped, “The Catholic Church is for saints and sinners alone.

For respectable people, the Anglican Church will do.” In *A Prayer Journal*, O’Connor says something else Wilde might have said: “Sin is a great thing as long as it’s recognized” (26). O’Connor clarifies her statement by adding: “It leads a good many people to God who wouldn’t get there otherwise” (26). The godlessness of the protagonist of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and that of *Child of God* are different. The protagonist Mary McCarthy seems to believe, like the narrator of *Heart of the World*, that her knowledge about Christ and his Church will safeguard her from damnation. Her knowledge about her Savior will, quite literally, re-place her love for her Lover. She would have done well to follow her own advice, but this is not new—it is the perennial problem of theology and literature. In a way, the problem of poetry is the problem of sin. Without the Divine Mystery, theology and poetry are empty husks of knowledge.

O’Connor says that the soul is “a moth who would be king, a stupid slothful thing, a foolish thing, who wants God, who made the earth, to be its Lover. Immediately” (39). O’Connor grapples with the strange dynamic whereby the human heart at once desires intimacy with the Divine Mystery and does not seem to enjoy a taste for it whatsoever. The final “Immediately” is a fitting adverb for this ambivalent longing. As a slothful thing, the human heart is able to put off continually what it desires most. In chronological terms, it usually does not desire the Divine Mystery immediately; rather, it more often than not decides to follow the Divine Mystery only when it is confronted with death. O’Connor’s Misfit speaks insightfully when he says that the grandmother “would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (CS 133). In ontological terms, however, O’Connor sees that the soul “immediately”

desires the Divine Mystery —that is to say, without time or any other sort of “medium” getting in the way. O’Connor is expressing, again, Augustine’s human and divine dictum that our hearts are restless until they rest in the Divine Mystery.

Catholic literary theory depicts a universe, in which we are made in the Divine Mystery’s image and likeness. Satan and sin enslave us when we reject this reality. We are made free in the Divine Mystery’s love when we receive it. In *Beauteous Truth*, Pearce explores this quest for freedom. He questions the disappearance of the Catholic Literary Revival, which he says began near the end of the eighteenth century with Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* and seems to have ended with the death of J.R.R Tolkien in 1973, which also happens to be the year that *Child of God* was published. Pearce says,

These questions are answered by history. The great and true can thrive in the desert. Christ triumphed in the desert, as did John the Baptist, and as did the Fathers of the Church. And what is true of God and His Catholic saints is true of Catholic writers. Shakespeare rose phoenix-like from the ashes of the Machiavellian desert of Elizabethan politics; Newman rose from the ruins of Anglicanism; Chesterton ascended from the wasteland of heresy; and Eliot sang like a latter-day Jeremiah from the wreck of post-war England. (139)

Although Pearce recognizes that we are and have been for decades in the “desert of (post)modernity,” he also acknowledges, in true Catholic fashion, that there is hope for the Catholic Literary Revival. He says, “It is, therefore, not altogether surprising that we are beginning to see the emergence of a new generation of Catholic writers in the very midst of today’s hostile culture” (139). With such a “Christian realist” view in mind, the Catholic writer can, saving fear of the Divine Mystery, write fearlessly. If she fails, and if so many others fail with her, she will humbly implore the Divine Mystery’s grace yet once again. If she perseveres in charity, she will finally enjoy that perfection of happiness

that we call “poetry”—in the years, centuries, and many millennia to come—both now and in eternity.

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