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In the Flesh: Fiction as an "Incarnational Art"

I arrived in Chicago in January of 2014, fresh from the warm Southern embrace of an imaginative English department at a small Christian liberal arts university. Chicago, as I saw it, was rich in artistic appreciation and participation, but equally abounding in rugged industrial pragmatism. Throughout that spring 2014 semester, I commuted from Pilsen, my beloved neighborhood known for its artists (some of whom also worked in a more "practical" job to earn money) to the business center of the city (which was not devoid of artists either). Although the world of ideas and intuition can overlap the world of business and materialism, the two often conflict.

I am by no account a professional artist, but I do consider literary art an essential part of my self-expression and identity. My struggle to find the time and energy to write as much as I felt I needed to while in Chicago enabled me to empathize with the artists in my community. As I attempted to balance practical necessities like cooking, cleaning, and working at my internship, with the need to regularly and creatively express myself, it became clear to me that sustaining the creative mind and soul does not always coincide perfectly with sustaining the body. When time, energy, and resources are limited, one realm of human need must take precedence over the other. This dichotomy led me toward an interest in the intersection between art—especially literary art—and our physical human lives.

When Amy Sonheim, one of my professors in that precious English department mentioned above, came to town in February, she suggested over lunch that I read Flannery O'Connor's *Mystery and Manners*. Valuing her recommendation, I immediately ordered the book and soon found that O'Connor, too, takes note of the split between the realms of body and of soul, of form and of content, or—in her words—of mystery and of manners. In "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," one of several essays that make up the book, O'Connor briefly addresses the conflict that arises when artists, particularly writers, seek to "write well and live well at the same time" (66). She implies that good writers rarely live in financial comfort unless the writer already has copious amounts of money available by some other means.

That is, good writing is a full-time job that doesn't pay well. However, writers who work for the quality of what they write don't write primarily because they want financial rewards. Therefore, in "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," which O'Connor presented to a group of writing students, she reassesses what fiction is all about: what it is like and why good writers create it. In doing so, she describes writing fiction, or stories,[1] as an "incarnational art" (68). She explains that some people "want to write because they are possessed not by a story but by the bare bones of some abstract notion," but that fiction is concerned, rather, with "all those concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth" (68). In other words, fiction is sensuous. Although it touches the abstract, and although writers may have to sacrifice some of their own materialistic needs or desires for the sake of creating stories, fiction is a physical experience. This physicality, I think, parallels an important element of Christian theology.

My goal in this paper is to support O'Connor's claim that fiction is "incarnational" by providing additional evidence and addressing implications that she doesn't. I am professing that

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[1] I will address the distinction between these two terms later. Until then, I will use them interchangeably.

fiction-writing is indeed “incarnational,” in even more ways than O’Connor directly expresses. If this thesis holds true, then it is difficult for Christians to rightly make light of the art of story-writing. Contempt for creative writers is tempered in our time more by a trend toward tolerance than by public or personal conviction of the human need for storytellers. Even in an environment where making money and tending to physical needs and desires is prioritized, telling stories is essential. Although it would seem that Christians hold an advantage in understanding the significance of artistic creation, many who set out to follow Christ discount or greatly underestimate the importance of storytelling. Art is a spiritual endeavor, healing and stimulating the soul. Stories in particular, in that they are art, are also spiritual. But they are not just that. As Flannery O’Connor proclaims, they are “an incarnational art,” as much physical as they are spiritual, as paradoxical as God Himself in the flesh.

My audience is primarily Christian—artists and non-artists alike. Although I am not trying to prove God’s existence, it is possible that what is at stake here is a little more reason to think that there is some overall meaning to life, some grand story in which we all participate.

In considering O’Connor’s claim that writing fiction in some way resembles the taking on of human flesh, I will peer through the lens of Dorothy Sayers’ creative trinity. The three creative elements include Idea, Energy, and Power. Sayers was a twentieth-century writer and Anglican theologian whose book *The Mind of the Maker* explores the nature of human and divine creativity. In her chapter entitled “Idea, Energy, Power,” Sayers expounds upon the thoughts of her character St. Michael in her play *The Zeal of Thy House*. She quotes his speech and explains the idea of the “earthly trinity” that comprises “every work of creation” (37). This creative trinity applies to a wider range of creation than do O’Connor’s claims about fiction in

particular, but Sayers' invented system provides a helpful framework for considering O'Connor's ideas.

In Sayers' creative trinity, the Idea "precede[s] any mental or physical work upon the materials or on the course of the story" (38). That is, the Idea is pre-linguistic and inherently inaccessible on its own. It lives out in the same abstract world as the Platonic ideals of Love and Justice. Although it presumably exists before it is accessed—as evidenced by the writer's (or other visionary's) struggle to get it "right"—it cannot be touched without the consciousness provided by the Energy.

Once a writer or other artist starts creating, or even thinking of creating, Energy is being engaged. The Energy is that laborious attempt to grasp the pre-existing Idea. By further exploring this Energy later on, we will see how Sayers' ideas are in dialog with O'Connor's.

Power, the third player in the trinity, has more to do with the reader than the writer, although the writer can be affected by it as well. The Creative Power, as Sayers puts it, is "the meaning of the work and its response in the lively soul" (37-8). As the Holy Spirit guides those who welcome and acknowledge Him, so does the Creative Power of a work provoke feelings or actions in those who interact with it.

Although the connection may be subtly presented, Sayers' idea of creative Energy, which drives the fiction-writing process, resembles Christ, the second person of the Trinity, the incarnation of God the Father. God has always existed but was not made flesh until Jesus. Jesus shows us, in human terms, who God is. He came to change the way we think, to free us, to challenge us. He came at a single point in history, in time and space and matter.

In other words, Energy itself is the kenosis, the mysterious emptying that is necessary in any kind of art, but especially in story-writing. The apostle Paul, in fact, describes the

Incarnation in a similar way. A form of the Greek word *kénōsis* appears in the second chapter of his letter to the Philippians. In this passage, Paul encourages unity in his audience by reminding them of the pattern of humility that God set by becoming human for the sake of restoring humanity. This emptying, this letting go of comfort, is present in art as well as in the Christian narrative. Instead of remaining in its perfect state of separation, the Idea must become at least partially palpable and comprehensible, as God became physically present in the form of Christ.[2] By writing about creative Energy, Sayers gives a name to the act of emptying that fiction writers must perform in bringing the cloudy beginnings of a story into the concrete form of a text.

In order to assess Sayers' and O'Connor's claims about writing fiction, I composed a story:

Descrial

Red stopped her, and her eyes turned eastward. It must be the flitting of a cardinal, or maybe some kind of woodpecker, she thought, though she couldn't remember if either was native to these parts.

She looked ahead at the trail before her, and behind, and toward the distant craggy cliff, now dusk-drenched, that had followed her for the last who-knows-how-many miles. Taking note of where a small path veered off the trail, she veered with it. She typically didn't consider herself one to depart from the prescribed way, but out here in the woods she was not quite the same.

The red flashed ahead of her, disappearing behind heavy trees and appearing again between them as she walked. When she made it to a grassy clearing, she saw the

[2] Theologically, God, in all His persons, is controlled only by His omnipotent self. On the writer's side of the analogy, however there is a person (i.e., the writer himself) controlling the creative trinity.

red take a round, rubbery form high above her. Neither sinking nor ascending, it hovered alone. The sunlight broke through the forest and she caught herself staring, bewildered by the buoyant ball of air and wondering how she could possibly be here in a wild wood staring at a mysterious floating red balloon.

Its subtle, rhythmic pulse made it appear almost human. It breathed calmly, greeting her with wide waves in its tail. Its solo celebration looked almost like mourning, and she counted it worth capturing.

As she reached her left arm backward to grab her sketchbook out of her pack, she heard a rustle near her that she attributed to wind or squirrels or birds whose names she didn't know. Still, the sound was unsettling in its interruption of this intimate moment. Something in it felt wrong.

She pulled the small leather-bound book out of an elastic side pocket, and the slap of the stretchy material against the pack was the second unwelcome disturbance that threatened to pull her out of this covenant, this commitment to be locked together with an object unfit for its surroundings. As long as she looked at it, it seemed, the balloon would not move. She feared that turning away would cause it to disappear; the episode was too wonderfully odd to allow for such a risk.

Something heavy moved again. This time she knew there was a presence near her, large and looming. The balloon floated, still as ever.

She saw an auburn mass grow suddenly tall in the periphery of her vision. The creature craned its neck about, then dropped back down with a thud.

Don't run. Grizzlies are faster than people—she knew that much. Her mind, however, was outrunning whatever further instructions she knew of for situations like

this. The bear's head descended half the length of its legs, its ears went flat, and it growled low. Although her new floating friend was high enough to be out of any real danger, she feared for the delicate piece of rubber hanging overhead. If the bear did somehow reach it, those claws and teeth that she knew were coming for her could easily destroy that balloon in an instant, and it would come falling down to the ground, deflated and defeated. She couldn't let that happen. She knew she couldn't protect it, but still she wished she could.

The bear charged toward her, and she collapsed. Whether it was out of fear or precaution, no party present could tell; but she fell.

Play dead. She remembered it after she was already facedown with her hands over the back of her neck. She pretended to be invisible, like she used to do as a kid. All her thoughts were images, memories mysteriously featuring a round red guest.

She lay still. The only movement in her was her wild pulse and as little respiration as she could manage. With her face in the grass, she closed her eyes and thought of the balloon—calm and steady; silent and still; until her entrance, unnoticed.

Something cold and rough grazed her hands. She felt a sharp weight push her hard into the ground. Look deader, she thought. For a moment she imagined her heartbeat must be causing her to bounce inches high; the next, she supposed it must have stopped altogether. Stripes of pain shot through her arm. She felt the blood run down, and it took all her effort to keep from screaming. You're dead, she told herself. Show no pain. Be unseen.

Enough time passed as she lay there with her eyes shut tight that she thought maybe it had been a dream. Maybe it hadn't happened. Maybe she was in her ordinary bed in her ordinary house, waking to an ordinary day. The wounds still stung and bled, but the grass was comfortable. Silence—the thick, wet, breezy kind of silence that occurs in the woods immediately following an encounter with a wild bear—permeated the scene. She had no way of knowing how long it had been since she heard the last traces of pawsteps. She still felt pain in her arm and soreness in her body, but by God the bear was gone. She opened her eyes. She looked around tentatively and noticed that red soaked the grass. She pulled off her pack and turned over, searching for she knew not what. The sky looked inviting—big and empty and blue.

I had a vision for my story, but I had to work to express it. I had to make time to put the words together. I had to use material resources like ink and paper. The more taxing aspect, however, was the mental work involved. The initial stages of writing are more mysterious to me now than they were when I was just learning to write. Once I start writing, content is produced by some seemingly inexplicable effort.

Although creative mental work may not be as obviously strenuous as physical labor, good writing does require focus and skill. In his poem "Adam's Curse," Yeats recognizes and comments on the difference between a writer's work and more physical types of labor. Although the following lines appear in the speaker's discussion of poetry, the thought carries through to fiction as well. After comparing a line of poetry that fails to "seem a moment's thought" with tasks like breaking stones and scrubbing a kitchen floor, the speaker asserts the idea that writing is not as easy as it looks:

> For to articulate sweet sounds together
>
> Is to work harder than all these, and yet
>
> Be thought an idler by the noisy set
>
> Of bankers, schoolmasters, and clergymen
>
> The martyrs call the world.

A writer's work may not appear difficult, but Yeats implies that the appearance of ease is often an illusion that occurs, ironically, because of the skill and the discipline that the writer has exercised in laboring a line into existence.

When I write, I may sit in a comfortable chair in a quiet room for hours. I may do my work while leaning against a tree and wiggling my toes in the cool grass. I could have a cup of tea in my hand, or I could be picking at a bowl of grapes. I cannot say it would be entirely unfair for an onlooker to deny that I am doing anything difficult. However, as I work I forget my surroundings. I sift through my entire collection of thoughts, my entire vocabulary, to find just the right words for the Idea I'm striving to portray. This process, though describable metaphorically, is more difficult to understand physiologically. After even twenty minutes of working on "Descrial," I would suddenly remember that my physical self was not strolling from one thought to another, trying them on like prom dresses, but was sitting in a corner booth in the student center, staring intently at the poor guy trying to order a Chai Latte at the coffee bar. At those moments, I would take a break and would be perplexed by why, after sitting still, I felt that I had just done such heavy work.

I am not the sole witness to this complex experience either. In fact, neuroscientists have attempted to determine why thinking is hard enough to be considered work. *NeuWrite West*, a

website written by a team of Stanford neuroscientists, published an article by Nick Weiler entitled “Ask a Neuroscientist: Why Is Thinking Hard So Hard?” Weiler uses the Stroop task as an example of a demanding mental task. The Stroop task is the exercise you’ve likely seen in some riddle book or psychology class, in which the names of colors are listed but the color of the text is different from the color the word signifies. The word “green,” for example, could be written in blue, “red” in yellow, and so on. Weiler attributes the ability to “remember,” “detect,” and “resolve” to the brain’s executive control regions.[3] Much research has been conducted on the connection between executive control functions and writing. While this brain function doesn’t apply only to fiction writing, it is still a necessary—and exhausting—mental process[4] that is needed to write stories. Understanding the neurological processes involved in writing stories allows us to see more clearly the link between God’s act of humiliation in facing human struggles in human form, and the move that writers make in struggling to create and record fictional stories.

For the sake of clarity, we ought to consider the difference between a fiction and a story, especially as we turn more directly to Flannery O’Connor’s statement that fiction is “an incarnational art.” Knowing the subject of her claim will help us understand why she, in another essay, calls it “the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts,” trumping other media by virtue of being “closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope” (192).

Exactly what it is that makes fiction more human is difficult to say, but exploring terminology will help. The Oxford English Dictionary’s many definitions of “fiction” generally amount to something fashioned or imitated, or the act of creating such a thing. One entry reads,

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[3] According to Weiler’s article, these regions include the anterior cingulate cortex and the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex.

[4] Such a “mental” process could also be classified as physical, since there is indeed observable physical activity going on in the brain, a physical organ. Even this minor point mirrors the incarnational paradox.

"a statement or narrative proceeding from mere invention; such statements collectively." However, O'Connor deliberately contrasts stories with "statements" as well as "statistics," claiming that narrative is what comes close to us as humans and what ultimately carries on the legacy of a people (192). What is the difference, then, between narrative and a collection of statements? It seems that a "fiction" could be a collection of statements that go together and describe something that is made up. A story, as I see it, is a type of fiction in which some event or series of events occurs. A fiction can be a story, but it doesn't have to be.

Writing fiction tends to involve creating human (or human-like) personalities. It has been suggested that perhaps a fiction could be written with neither persons nor personification—e.g., a fiction in a lifeless setting where nothing exists except "cube-shaped planets floating through the aether."[5] To this suggestion we can respond with the distinction between "fiction" and "story." While a fiction, it seems, could simply give a setting without characters or action, a story or narrative includes some kind of happening, whether obviously significant or seemingly negligible. According to the OED, as quoted above, "Once upon a time, there was an aether with cubes in it" would qualify as a fiction, which could simply be a statement. However, this does not mean that it can be properly called a story. In speaking of fiction, O'Connor is speaking of stories. O'Connor's fiction—i.e., stories, which require characters and action— cannot exist without the creation or re-creation of social beings. In other words, the act of existing naturally leads to social interaction, and this interaction must include some sort of conflict (external or internal) in order to become a story worth telling.

The inclusion of characters is one of the things that makes fiction human. Sayers claims that created characters are in some part an incarnation of the writer—maybe an exaggerated form

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[5] Tully Borland, e-mail message to author, February 2015.

of some characteristic of the writer, or even of some emotion the writer has experienced (52). Even if a writer created a completely opposite version of himself, the writer can only do so from the knowledge and experiences he or she has. For example, if I wanted to write into existence an anti-Marissa who hated tomatoes, I would only know how to create her because I do like tomatoes. I know what a tomato looks and tastes like, and I have the knowledge that there are such edible spheres that grow on vines sprouting up out of the earth. Because I have encountered tomatoes, I know how to write someone to hate them. Even if I wanted to create something entirely different from a tomato, I would always start with what I do know about tomatoes, and about plants in general, from my own experience. Because I cannot write anything without drawing from my own physical experiences, everything I write is in this way "incarnational."

Fiction is infused with personalities, which requires part of the writer's personality. But in giving pieces of his personality to his characters, the writer becomes no less himself. He gives himself but does not lose his selfhood. God, likewise, put himself in human form, but did not stop being God.

Creating personalities seems to be more taxing, more an act of emptying, than creating other things. The fiction writer not only has to make narrowing decisions from his omniscient[6] perspective, but he also has to do so from the perspective of multiple persons, each of whom may know more or less or may perceive circumstances differently than the others do. Shifting like this from one set of motives and background knowledge and ideologies to another must be more strenuous than writing purely from one's own perspective, which has already been formed.

Compared to stories I had written before, the story that I wrote for this project was much less character-driven. Even so, I had to explore an abundance of thoughts about hiking in the

[6] omniscient, that is, in relation to the story being written

forest and what kind of person might be doing such a thing alone and who would be likely to be captivated by something as quietly strange as a stray balloon. Likewise, I researched behavioral patterns of grizzly bears so that I would not misrepresent the non-human character in the story.

I do not, however, believe that the primary import of O'Connor's proposition—that is, that fiction is an extraordinarily "incarnational art"—is that writing fiction is hard. Why does it matter that fiction writers put little forms of themselves into a story? It could even be thought of as narcissistic to multiply oneself in such a way. But, first of all, what else are we to do? Our own personal experience of the world is all we have to work from. Secondly, writing characters from the personality of the writer makes for a good story and can even be beneficial in the life of the writer. There can hardly be a story built completely on characters that are morally perfect. There has to be a conflict for there to be a story. Conflict (often, if not always) requires at least one character with some degree of brokenness.[7] If a writer is writing, he is writing conflict. If he is writing conflict, he is writing some messed up, mistake-making, evil-loving characters. If he is writing these characters, he is to some degree writing himself. And if he can see himself in these characters, he is often even more alarmed by it than readers will be. The writer can thus be led to correction, or at least to a consideration of the rightness or wrongness of his actions. It is in this way that fiction is, as O' Connor says, "the most impure and the most modest and the most human of the arts. It is closest to man in his sin and his suffering and his hope" (192).

This pattern is not entirely in line with the analogy of Christ, of course. God has no need to repent or correct himself, so he cannot see his nonexistent flaws even in his human form. However, he did make himself weak in the ways that humans are weak. He made himself susceptible to hunger and thirst and sadness and physical pain. Fiction writers, similarly, place

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[7] Characters with weaknesses are necessary not only for conflict, but also for the creation of a world that is anywhere near believable.

these incarnations of themselves (i.e., characters) in a world created by the writer and allow them to be affected by that world.

Seeing this parallel, this incarnation in writing, could lead people—especially writers, but writers who are either Christian or not—to a greater understanding of God's presence in the world. If our acts of artistic creation work the way God's incarnation does, we can see the resemblance, as children see their parents' tendencies playing out in their own lives. The pattern is a little more evidence that we are indeed his. Taking note of the similarities between writing fiction and God's sending his Son into the world could also raise the level of respect for fiction writers. Writers who faithfully and artfully compose stories are not just being lazy or wasting their time, but they are doing real work that brings something meaningful and powerful into existence.

It seems as though, in our human lives, there is always physical work to be done, whether or not it is particularly satisfying. For dreamers like me, there is a challenge involved in balancing the necessary physical tasks and the differently necessary, spiritual act of creating art. I am lucky in that in my school life, from kindergarten through college, my primary responsibility has been mental work involving language, which happens to be the kind of work that comes most naturally to me. As I graduate and reach out into the adult world, I will have even more physical responsibilities to take care of—including myself, my space, and other people. My upcoming work of leading summer camps and, possibly, teaching will involve creativity and thought, but it will be much more physical and interactive than the comfortable solitude I prefer. Still, creative writing is as essential to me as breathing, though not nearly as simple. Even if I have to fight for the rest of my life to have the time and space to write, I will do it. If I have to

fight to maintain right motives for writing, I will do that as well. Keeping creative writing in my life may be a challenge; but without a challenge, there would be no story.

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