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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

“NOT PEACE BUT THE SWORD”:

VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN CATHOLIC LITERATURE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN ENGLISH

BY

MICHAEL O’CONNELL

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

MAY 2013

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For Lauren, of course

Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not
peace but the sword.

– Matthew 10: 34

I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and
preparing them to accept their moments of grace.

– Flannery O'Connor, "A Reasonable Use of the Unreasonable"

Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane? And how
is it that death, the nearness of death, can restore a missed life?

– Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: READING CATHOLIC VIOLENCE

A young man murders his cousin, and then is sexually assaulted by a stranger. A husband murders his wife and her lover, and fantasizes about leaving the mental asylum and killing many more people. A father kidnaps and murders his son's killer in cold blood. A mob of suburban fathers uses rakes and shovels to fight a gang of young hoodlums. A police officer is tied to a tree and forced to watch as dogs maul his wife. A young woman begins to bleed from unexplainable wounds in her hands and feet. A man sets his son on fire to get even with his wife. A deranged hermit tells a complete stranger that he is going to murder him.

None of these brief plot descriptions sounds particularly religious, yet they all come from novels written by American Catholic authors within the past 50 years – in order: Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*; Walker Percy's *Lancelot*; Andre Dubus's "Killings"; Alice McDermott's *That Night*; Tim Gautreaux's *The Missing*; Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy*; John L'Heureux's *The Shrine at Altamira*; Annie Dillard's *The Living*. One could easily expand on this list to include novels written by non-Americans. Greenland, the fictional landscape of Graham Greene's novels, is a dark and violent place, with his so-called Catholic novels featuring just as many brutal deaths as his non-Catholic "entertainments." Muriel Spark's oeuvre is riddled with murderers and purveyors of violence. Georges Bernanos and Francis Mauriac, two fathers of the

twentieth century Catholic novel, both wrote novels that include scenes of rape and suicide, among other moments of graphic and shocking violence.

From even this brief and incomplete survey of violent moments it is readily apparent that Catholic literature is, on the whole, violent. Of course not every Catholic story or novel revolves around a moment of violence, but an astounding number of them do. Although many scholars of Catholic fiction do note the presence of violence in these works, no single study to date has explored this topic in any depth, or offered any comprehensive explanation for why Catholic fiction is so inundated by violent themes and motifs. This is a glaring omission, because violence is not just a consistent subject in Catholic fiction, it is one of its defining traits. Indeed, to read Catholic fiction is to be repeatedly confronted, perhaps even assaulted, by images of violence. It is my contention that one can best, and perhaps only, understand the violence of these works by approaching them through the philosophical and imaginative discourses of the Catholic faith.

The purpose of this study is three-fold. First, to demonstrate that violence is a consistent and significant theme in Catholic literature. Second, to provide a coherent and comprehensive analysis of why this is the case, which will entail an exploration of the nature of the Catholic literary imagination. I will argue that Catholic authors use violence primarily as a narrative technique that brings about a type of conversion experience, or moment of grace, for the characters involved. In addition to this, Catholic literature is so often violent because Catholic authors believe that encountering violence in a fictional form can affect readers, just as it does the characters within the fiction. I contend that

moments of narrative violence are the aesthetic strategy employed by Catholic authors to affect their readers; by forcing their readers into encounters with violence, authors formed or inspired by the Catholic imagination use their fiction as a means of attempting to change the ways their readers see and understand their world and their own place within it.¹ Third, by focusing primarily on contemporary American literature, I will show how and why this aesthetic strategy changes over time. As Catholic culture becomes less distinguishable from the broader American culture it is ostensibly critiquing, the depictions of transcendence that Catholic authors portray in their fiction become less readily identifiable as definitively Catholic, although, as I will show, they continue to manifest distinctly Catholic traits. In addition, contemporary Catholic authors are less inclined than their pre-Vatican II counterparts to use their fiction to advance a Catholic worldview, and thus they are less likely to create fictions which are designed to lead readers toward an understanding of the world that is fundamentally Catholic. In order to accomplish any of these goals, though, I need to do three things: clarify what I mean by Catholic literature; differentiate the violence of Catholic literature from the violence found in other, non-Catholic, literature; and elucidate the theoretical methodology that informs my approach to studying violence in Catholic literature.

What is Catholic Literature?

There is no clear, agreed upon definition of what constitutes Catholic fiction. One of the primary divisions in critics' conceptions of Catholic literature is the question of narrative content versus authorial biography. Is a work's Catholicism found in its subject

¹ I realize that this will entail treading into the dangerous waters of 'authorial intention,' and that I need to tread carefully as I attempt to both explicate the motives behind authorial decisions and claim that these motives are an important tool in explaining the ways these fictions work.

matter or in the personal belief system of its author? Is a work by a non-Catholic, but about Catholics, Catholic literature? Or, if we decide an author must be Catholic to produce Catholic literature, what is one to do with non-practicing, or non-believing, Catholics? Is there such a thing as a cultural Catholic? If a former Catholic, who has left the Church, writes about non-Catholic matters, is this Catholic literature? Or, for that matter, what if a practicing Catholic writes about non-Catholic subjects? Does the author's biography matter at all? Does the work need to have a spiritual or religious dimension in order to qualify, or is there some other quality, altogether distinct, that makes a work Catholic? What separates Catholic literature from non-Catholic literature, if it is not simply a matter of content or authorial biography? If the defining characteristics are too broad (for instance, any work by any writer who was at one time Catholic), the whole idea of a distinct category of Catholic literature becomes essentially meaningless. But if it is too narrow (say, only works by practicing Catholics with Catholic content), then we are left with a very restricted sense of what constitutes Catholic fiction.

Scholars of Catholic literature tend to address these questions from either a sociological perspective or from a theological one. Depending on the approach, scholars view Catholicism as either a cultural phenomenon or as an ontological belief system. Those who approach Catholic literature from a cultural studies perspective understand Catholicism as a set of rituals, beliefs and practices followed by a distinct cultural group. One of the main problems with this approach to Catholicism is that, despite the centralized hierarchy radiating out from the Vatican, the Catholic Church is not a

monolithic cultural organization. Anyone seeking to understand Catholic literature as the product of a particular culture needs to be careful not to have an undifferentiated view of Catholicism. While certain aspects of Catholic faith and culture are truly catholic, or universal, regional differences and historical context must also be accounted for in any study of Catholic fiction.

When studying Catholic literature from a sociological perspective, it is of paramount importance to position the artist within his or her specific cultural milieu. There are broad differences between the way Catholicism is experienced and practiced in different parts of the world. Being part of the distinct and at one time persecuted Catholic minority in Japan, as the twentieth century writer Shusako Endo was, is of course radically different from being a twenty-first century Catholic in the religiously divided Nigeria, like the priest-novelist Uwem Akpan, and both are markedly different from being raised in the Catholic majority in a colonized country like Ireland, which shaped James Joyce's life and fiction. The early twentieth century French experience of Catholicism, as portrayed by Georges Bernanos and Francois Mauriac, is radically different from Greene's mid-century English experience of it, and both are distinct from the experience of being Catholic in Joyce's Ireland or in Walker Percy's America, for that matter. Catholicism had been the dominant religious and cultural institution in France for centuries, and in twentieth century Ireland it still was a political and cultural force; in British and American intellectual and cultural history it occupied a distinctly outsider position.

Paul Giles's *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* (2000) is the most comprehensive sociological, as opposed to theological, treatment of American Catholic literature. In his own words, his purpose is, "not to consider Catholicism as a theological entity...but as a residual cultural determinant and one aspect of the social context within which various American artists of this century have been working" (1). He draws attention to key traits of specifically *American* Catholic literature, including the experience of desiring, but at the same time being suspicious of, assimilation into mainstream American life. Giles's work demonstrates the various ways that Catholic literature in America has also been a minority literature, and as such is thematically indebted to a sense of alienation. Utilizing this approach, he shows how the American Catholic literary tradition is both shaped by, and in reaction against, the larger cultural concerns of the modern, industrialized, predominantly Protestant culture of which it is a part. He also emphasizes how "American Catholic culture" in particular has "taken an interrogative stance towards canonical assumptions" of Catholic doctrine, and his work draws attention to "the continuing tension between Roman dogma and American liberalism" (505). The desire to contain and allow for these many cultural differences is one reason I have chosen to limit this study to American Catholic fiction. One could write an interesting study of the ways that cultural and national boundaries affect Catholic writers' use of violence in fiction, but I have chosen to delve deeper into the American approach to these themes because this restricted focus will result in a more detailed and nuanced discussion of changes in American Catholic fiction in the years since Vatican II.

In tandem with the larger cultural differences in the experience of Catholicism, one must also bear in mind how an individual author's personal experiences of Catholicism shaped his/her fictional works. Converts like Greene, Percy, Evelyn Waugh, and Muriel Spark have a different intellectual and cultural understanding of their faith than do "cradle Catholics" like O'Connor, Gautreaux, McDermott, or David Lodge. There are also authors who were brought up in Catholic environments that later left the institutional Church, like Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Cormac McCarthy, all of whose fictions are nevertheless deeply influenced by their Catholic upbringing, and reflect a Catholic preoccupation with guilt, redemption, salvation and damnation. Joyce identifies this condition in his own work, when in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Cranley tells Stephen, "It is a curious thing...how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve" (240). The umbrella of Catholic fiction is wide enough to cover both apostates and converts to Catholicism. It covers those artists whose fictions reflect the intellectual and spiritual heritage of Catholic thought (Bernanos, O'Connor, Percy) and those whose fictions portray the rituals and practices that make Catholicism not only a religion but also a cultural identity (Lodge, Gordon, McDermott, Gautreaux).

Roman Catholicism, of course, has undergone widespread institutional change over the course of the twentieth century, leading to paradigmatic shifts in the way Catholics understand and represent the world and their own role within it. Since these changes significantly altered what sociologist Andrew Greeley calls "the Catholic imagination" of writers, there needs to be some distinction made between fictions written

before, during, and after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).² For instance, David Lodge (1935) has a markedly different view of English Catholicism than does Evelyn Waugh (1903-66), in large part because their experience of what it meant to be Catholic was drastically altered by the changes of Vatican II. Waugh's Catholics are a largely aristocratic remnant, holding on tightly to an old order that is challenged by modernity; Lodge's Catholics are integrated into their societies, although their Catholic scruples and practices can keep them from total immersion in their culture. One can even see this shift in focus in a particular author's oeuvre as well; for instance, Mark Bosco's *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (2005) illustrates how the Catholic elements in Greene's later fiction reflect many of the changing foci of a post-conciliar Church.

The Second Vatican Council was the central event in twentieth century Catholicism, and as such, it had a dramatic impact on the form and content of the twentieth century Catholic novel. Whether one is intending to study Catholic literature from a cultural or theological perspective, one must take into account the significant changes brought about by Vatican II, not only on the rituals and practices of the Church, and in how the Church presents itself to the world, but also on the various cultural manifestations of the Catholic imagination. Theodore Fraser's *The Modern Catholic Novel in Europe* (1994) offers three important concepts from Vatican II that, "have influenced the form the Catholic novel has taken in recent years" (149). The first of these is "what has been called 'the perspective from below,' or the commitment to confer on secular forms of human life not merely social and functional significance but also deep

² For a helpful overview on the impact of Vatican II, as well as the widespread cultural changes of the 1960s, on American Catholicism, see Chapter 15 of Jay Dolan's *The American Catholic Experience* (1985).

sacramental meaning,” which he contrasts with “the absolute power and mystery of sacramental forms” as construed by the Catholic imagination earlier in the century (149). The second important development in Catholic thought that Fraser identifies is “the turning away from static dualism of body and soul to a more holistic view of human nature” (149). The third, and perhaps most drastic, development includes all of “the changes in the way the Church regarded itself and the outside world” (150). Virtually everyone who has written about the contemporary Catholic novel identifies at least one, and possibly all, of these developments as being central to the success or failure of this art form.

To start with the last point first, for many scholars of Catholic literature it makes little sense to speak about a post-Vatican II Catholic literature, because the post-conciliar Church no longer maintained many of the key cultural or theological differences that made it unique. For these critics and theorists, Catholicism is no longer a distinct cultural identity. As Ross Labrie, in *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (1997), notes, “The fiction and poetry written by American Catholics in the 1960s and 1970s reflected the flux of a church that seemed no longer certain of its mission and increasingly at odds with itself” (13). Gene Kellogg, in *The Vital Tradition: The Catholic Novel in a Period of Convergence* (1970), puts the problem in stark confrontational terms: “So much assimilation had taken place [after Vatican II] that there was a crisis of identity. Catholics, no longer so critical of secularism, became by an unfortunate corollary often also no longer critical of the inroads of secularism into Catholicism’s own essence. It became difficult for many Catholics to discern what Catholics advocated that

was not also advocated by most men of good will” (227). It is true that pre-Vatican II Catholic fiction has more clearly delineated boundaries, and is more readily identifiable, than contemporary Catholic fiction. The pre-Vatican II Church gave the Catholic writer a secure and somewhat isolated position from which to critique modernity’s excesses. Put quite plainly, the pre-Vatican II Church maintained a critical distance from contemporary culture, leaving it room to critique from afar; the Vatican II call for *aggiornamento* led the Church to engage the culture, thereby depriving it of its unique position vis-à-vis the contemporary world.

Kellogg suggests that once the Church turned toward the world, Catholic literature lost its defining trait: “Without the abrasiveness of such a distinction from the secular environment, the spark of creative growth cannot be struck. Creativity’s manifestations diminish. It seems probable they will continue to diminish until such time as Catholics reestablish their identity and maintain their distinctness from the modern world” (229). Bosco, too, indicates that *aggiornamento* had a negative effect on the creative power of the Catholic imagination: “The effect of Vatican II...is that Catholic difference, which had such clear and defined contours in opposition to Protestant hegemonies in politics, philosophy and theology, lost its ability to engage the creative imagination of Catholic writers...The dialectical stance of the Church toward the outside world was so diminished or buried under an ambivalent Christian humanism that the explicit markers of a Catholic culture and orthodox creed were no longer visible” (10). If the imaginations of Catholic artists could no longer be inspired by their sense of

uniqueness, of difference, in what sense can we still speak of a distinct Catholic imagination?

Anita Gandolfo's *Testing the Faith: The New Catholic Fiction in America* (1992) takes a less pessimistic stance on the loss of cultural difference brought about by Vatican II. Rather than seeing it as a hindrance to the Catholic imagination, she notes how it is a spur to creativity. She, like Labrie and Kellogg, highlights the disaffection and alienation expressed by many Catholic writers in the immediate post-conciliar moment:

“Studies...show that when a coherent and transcendent structure of meaning loses significance, a feeling of dislocation occurs among people allied to that structure. As supernatural frameworks of meaning are eroded, individuals often feel rootless; they suffer from a sense of dispossession. And these feelings of anomie are manifested in contemporary Catholic fiction” (20), but she goes on to show that these feelings can give rise to important artistic expressions,³ praising contemporary Catholic fiction for the way it “documents a significant cultural shift in Catholicism...and provides insight into the transformational processes at work in contemporary Catholic culture in the United States” (206). In Gandolfo's view, fiction becomes the necessary place for the faithful to engage with, and occasionally resist, the role of their faith in an increasingly secular age. Catholic fiction is one of the primary cultural expressions that give voice to what it means to be Catholic in the contemporary age. Indeed, contemporary Catholic fiction is worth reading and studying precisely because it depicts this tension between secular and

³ Anyone who has read the late Victorians can attest to the artistic power that can be generated by such a sense of dispossession. The Victorians, after all, were also passing through a moment where many, if not most, of their transcendent signifiers were being upended by advances in science and psychology.

religious sensibilities, which remains one of the defining tensions of our contemporary age.⁴

While Gandolfo celebrates the possibilities inherent in post-conciliar Catholic fiction, J.C. Whitehouse takes a decidedly negative stance on the effect of Vatican II on the Catholic imagination. His *Vertical Man: The Human Being in the Catholic Novels of Graham Greene, Sigrid Undset, and Georges Bernanos* (1999) concludes with a particularly bleak view of the state of contemporary Catholic fiction. In his view, the main impact of Vatican II has been to dis-orient the Catholic believer, replacing a properly oriented hierarchical relationship between humanity and God with an understanding of “Man as a social unit with no significant personhood, a conditioned operant existing in a horizontal continuum where all is relative, contingent and ultimately value free” (207). In Whitehouse’s formulation, pre-Vatican II fiction is primarily concerned with the isolated, sinful individual, who is cut off from, and yet is yearning for, God. The sinner and God enact a drama of reconciliation, played out against a hostile, unbelieving world. This formulation goes back to Fraser’s claim that pre-Vatican II fiction emphasized a dualistic view of human nature, and dwelled on the body-soul dichotomy. Whitehouse focuses on the ways in which Catholic writers of the first half of

⁴ Although the ‘new atheists’ might argue otherwise, America is still ostensibly a believing nation. More than 95% of Americans profess to believe in God, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life “U.S. Religious Landscape Survey” (2008). In part, my study is an attempt to find out how this belief is manifested in contemporary American society. Although there are far more Protestant Christians in America than Catholics (51.3% of the population vs. 23.9%), the Pew report identifies the Catholic Church as the single largest religious denomination in the country, so contemporary Catholic fiction is one place to turn in an attempt to see how religious belief affects the way contemporary Americans think and act. One additional finding of the Pew report that is relevant to my discussion of belief in the modern age is that “the number of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today (16.1%) is more than double the number who say they were not affiliated with any particular religion as children.” While these unaffiliated Americans are not, by and large, atheists or agnostics, they do point toward the changing nature of religious identity in contemporary America. For more on this, see below, “Catholic Literature in a Secular Age,” page 39 and following.

the century emphasize the individual's personal, and isolated, relationship with the transcendent, and he indicates that this theological model is insufficient for a post-conciliar church. If the Catholic imagination in the early twentieth century was a "vertical" one, concerned with the relationship between the character and a transcendent God, then the contemporary Catholic imagination is structured as a "horizontal" one, less focused on individual salvation, and more concerned with a search for a loving and supportive community on pilgrimage together in faith. This emphasis on social relationships, or the search for community, is present in nearly every post-Vatican II Catholic fiction, and may be attributable to the council's focus on the horizontal, rather than exclusively vertical, nature of humanity's relation to God.

While most scholars of contemporary Catholic literature, like Gandolfo, Marian Crowe, and John C. Waldmeir, find this emphasis on community a positive development in contemporary Catholic fiction, Whitehouse asserts that it has resulted in a reductive view of humanity and in a diminished Catholic imagination, in which the vertical orientation of pre-conciliar Catholic fiction, "has largely given way to a representation of the human being as a nexus of social relationships" (15). For Whitehouse, this emphasis upon communal, rather than individual, experience lessens the dramatic power of the work and results in a debased view of individual agency. He contends this type of fiction, which emphasizes "the social, political, and economic dimensions of [characters'] lives" runs the risk of making individuals into less than fully autonomous, and responsible, figures (16). In his view, that which made the Catholic novel worthwhile – the "Catholic view of man as a creature of enormous individual worth...moving gradually towards

salvation or damnation” (13) – can no longer be the focus of Catholic fiction, because it is no longer the prioritized view emanating from the Catholic Church.

Whitehouse critiques the way the changes in the theological emphasis of Roman Catholicism, initiated by Vatican II, have affected the potentiality of the Catholic imagination. While I disagree with his assertions about the negative results of these changes, he is right that any comprehensive approach to understanding twentieth century Catholic fiction must attempt to identify the ways in which the theological framework of Catholicism shapes the artist’s imagination. This brings us back to Fraser’s first claim about the changes wrought by Vatican II, that it emphasized a “perspective from below,” that gave “secular forms of human life not merely social and functional significance but also deep sacramental meaning” (149). While Fraser gives too much weight to the idea that this is a particularly new development in Catholic thought – indeed, the entire tradition of twentieth century Catholic literature is more or less defined by this trait – he is right to draw attention to the way Vatican II prioritized this sacramental sense in the most secular and quotidian aspects of life. Contemporary Catholic literature is, above all, shaped by a sacramental tradition, which remains the essence of the Catholic imagination.

Catholic philosopher and literary critic William Lynch defines the religious imagination in the following manner:

All the resources of man, all his faculties, his whole history, his whole life, and his whole heritage, all brought to bear upon the concrete world inside and outside of himself, to form images of the world, and thus to find it, cope with it, shape it, even make it. The task of the imagination is to imagine the real. . . . The religious imagination, given certain resources, tries literally to imagine things with God. Again and again, therefore, it finds itself rearranging patterns of facts and evidence into new patterns, according to its own information, its own forms, its

own history. It pours everything that it knows and wants into its own patterns. It says simply: This is the way I see things. (*Christ and Prometheus* 23)

For Lynch, it is the imagination, rather than the intellect alone, that shapes the individual's experience of the world, and this imaginative process is something that leads the individual toward the experience of God. This holistic and totalizing understanding of the role and function of the imagination is one reason the Catholic novel is still a vibrant and unique form of artistic expression. Each individual artist's imagination will differ, based on individual life experiences, but the imaginative faculties of all Catholic writers, whether they are raised in the Catholic tradition or have come to embrace it at some point later in their life, will be, in part, shaped by the common tradition and beliefs of the Church. Catholicism changes, and so the imagination of Catholics will change along with it, but there are certain unifying elements and traits that remain constant. They are central to the modern Catholic imagination because they are a consistent part of a theologically grounded Catholic worldview. In fact, the Catholic imagination, although necessarily diverse, does manifest a broad similarity of "patterns," and it is possible to identify specific patterns at work in the twentieth century Catholic novel. Bosco, in *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination*, identifies five unifying themes of the Catholic novel: the sinner at the "heart of Christianity"; the tension between corrupt flesh and transcendent spirit (usually in terms of sexual tension); a critique of materialism/rationalism; the presence of spiritual substitution/sacrifice (sometimes referred to as vicarious suffering); and the depiction of the Divine as the "Hound of Heaven." In part, my project is an attempt to argue for a sixth trait: the presence and significance of moments of shocking violence. But there is an even more widespread and identifiable trait of the Catholic

imagination that supplies the philosophical support for all of these: the Catholic understanding of sacramentality, which is manifested in Catholic art, liturgy, theology and philosophy.

The religious worldview that informs Catholic literature is incarnational and sacramental. Catholic theology holds that all of creation is sacred, and filled with the presence of God. Greeley, in *The Catholic Imagination* (2001), describes how the Catholic imagination “sees created reality as a ‘sacrament,’ that is, a revelation of the presence of God” (1). He goes on to explain that for Catholics “the objects, events, and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of God, and indeed make God in some fashion present to us” (6). Catholics believe a sacrament is “an external sign of something sacred” but “the sacraments of the Christian dispensation are not mere signs; they do not merely signify Divine grace, but in virtue of their Divine institution, they cause that grace in the souls of men” (“Sacraments”).⁵ The Catholic sacramental view of reality indicates that the world, and everything in it, can lead one to experience grace, or to have an experience of the divine. In the words of Catholic priest and theologian Richard McBrien, Catholic sacramentality holds that “God is present everywhere, the invisible in the

⁵ A number of twentieth century theologians have written on the precise nature of Catholic sacramentality. I have found Edward Schillebeeckx description of sacrament as encounter between God and humanity to be particularly illuminating. He writes that “sacramentality...bridges the gap and solves the disproportion between the Christ of heaven and unglorified humanity, and makes possible a reciprocal human encounter of Christ and men even after the ascension...The Church’s sacraments are not things but encounters of men on earth with the glorified man Jesus by way of a visible form” (44). The theologian who explores this concept of sacrament as encounter most extensively, particularly as it relates to literature, is Hans Urs von Balthasar. Michael Murphy’s *A Theology of Criticism* is an excellent study of the connection between Balthasar’s sacramental theology and the form of the Catholic imagination. Murphy demonstrates how in Balthasar’s theological vision, “Art performs a sacramentality and so amplifies the connection between what is ‘worded’ or ‘imaged’ (i.e., the *kataphatic*) and what remains on the edge of expression (i.e., the *apophatic*). The content of the sacramental ‘performance’ is revealed by analogy, grasped by the analogical imagination” (51). This sacramental, analogical imagination shapes Catholic fiction.

visible, within us and within the whole created order” (1199). Literary critic Mary Reichardt identifies this sacramental sensibility as central to the aesthetics of Catholic art: “a defining feature of a Catholic vision and one that sets it apart from strictly deterministic theories is that it is open to supernatural mystery, the existence of another world beyond that of the senses to which human beings are ultimately oriented” (4).

My understanding of the sacramental nature of the particularly Catholic imagination is heavily indebted to the work of contemporary theologian David Tracy. Tracy, in *Plurality and Ambiguity* (1987), differentiates between the analogical imagination of the Catholic community, where relationships are built upon an understanding of “similarity-in-difference,” and the dialectical imagination of the Protestant community, which exposes differences and places them in opposition (20). Tracy’s *The Analogical Imagination* (1981) elaborates on these differences between the Catholic and Protestant views of reality, through a discussion of what he terms the “Classic” texts of each tradition.⁶ Tracy demonstrates that Catholic theologians and writers tend to focus on the ways God is manifested in created reality, whereas Protestants understand God as being beyond the limits of understanding or comprehension. In the Protestant tradition, as opposed to the Catholic one, God is envisioned as transcendent rather than immanent, as absent rather than present, and as dis-similar rather than similar. The Catholic understanding of a God who is present in all of creation gives rise to a literary tradition that seeks to make this presence manifest,

⁶ By a “Classic” text, Tracy means a work that both retains significance over time and bears an excess of meaning; the classic continually confronts the reader with the feeling that something beyond one’s facile understanding might be at work (*Analogical* 101-07). His use of the classic text to make his case underlines the idea that texts are by their very nature open to a theological hermeneutic, that it is the text that describes and orientates the discourse.

primarily through the use of metaphor and symbolism. In this sense, the analogical imagination is a product of a theological view of existence (God is present and reveals Himself in nature and the human realm), that gives rise to a particular literary style (the use of symbolism and metaphor as a particularly valid means of mediating objective reality).

Tracy's insight into the differences between the Catholic and Protestant imaginations finds a surprising analog in J. Hillis Miller's *The Disappearance of God* (1963). Miller, although not a theologian, is an astute critic of narrative ethics, and in this early work he explores the way the changing consciousness of the western world in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries affected the religious sensibility found in the literature of the age. He, like Tracy, notes a difference between transcendent and sacramental worldviews, or between belief in a God who "exists, but...is out of reach" and a religious sensibility that "experienced the divine power as immediately present in nature, in society, and in each man's heart" (1-2). He writes that this latter, sacramental, mindset, which had been the dominant social paradigm for most of the history of Christendom, was no longer accessible, because, in the modern consciousness, God "no longer inheres in the world as the force binding together all men and all things" (2).

Miller writes that the sacramental sensibility of the old, Catholic-Christian worldview created a system of order and meaning: "created things were not merely signs pointing to something which remained off at a distance, separated...created things participated in the supernatural reality they signified" (3), and this inherent meaning carried over into language as well: "the words of the poem incarnated the things they

named...poetry was meaningful in the same way as nature itself – by a communion of the verbal symbols with the reality they named” (3). In Miller’s account, the disappearance of God from the world goes hand in hand with modernity’s emphasis upon individualism, and both are directly connected to “the Protestant reinterpretation of the Eucharist” as symbol rather than sacrament (6). If “the idea of the Incarnation was the ultimate basis for this harmony,” then the loss of belief in God’s real presence in the world, and in the sacraments, was a fundamental step in bringing about the fragmentation of modernity, “the splitting apart...of the cultural unity of man, God, nature and language” (3). Miller directly connects this to aesthetic practice: “the old symbolism of analogical participation is gradually replaced by the modern poetic symbolism of reference at a distance” where “such symbols designate an absence, not a presence” (6).

What Miller’s approach fails to recognize, and which Tracy’s work helps to illuminate, is that this symbolic understanding of modern literature, with its emphasis on absence and longing, is incomplete because it fails to take into account the metaphysical assumptions that govern Catholic aesthetics. Miller writes as if the sensibility that guides all nineteenth and early twentieth century literature is shaped by the absence of, and longing for, God, whereas Tracy sees this as primarily a Protestant trait, and defines Catholic literature as still celebrating God’s presence, albeit in slightly hidden or unexpected forms. Jacques Maritain, one of the most important contributors to the concept of Catholic aesthetics, articulates an understanding of art that directly reflects the worldview that Miller claims has been lost: “Art...is fundamentally constructive and creative. It is the faculty of producing, not of course *ex nihilo*, but out of pre-existing

matter, a new creature, an original being capable in its turn of moving a human soul.

...Artistic creation does not copy God's creation, but continues it" (49). In this sense, Miller's account, and perhaps also his deconstructive theoretical approach that grows out of it, is an inadequate approach to Catholic literature.

Miller writes that "modern thought" (and by extension modern literature) "has been increasingly dominated by the presupposition that each man is locked in the prison of his consciousness" (7). Catholic literature, with its sacramental and incarnational understanding of existence, offers a distinctly alternative account of the modern condition. In the Catholic imagination the individual may still be a prisoner of his or her own isolated self-consciousness, but he or she does not *need* to be one. Catholic literature attempts to reflect a worldview that transcends this sense of isolation and entrapment. If the individual is imprisoned, the Catholic writer is not content to simply depict this condition, he or she is interested in envisioning a way out. The Catholic writer attempts to reveal presence instead of absence within the prison of the severed ego.

But how does one accomplish this? The answer will change depending on the circumstances of the individual story, but the overall pattern found in much Catholic fiction involves the use of violence in the service of a sacramental imagination. Catholic literature, because of its analogical character, points beyond a purely deterministic understanding of human nature. It is constructed on the premise that there is something more at work in human existence than biological processes. Central to this belief is the idea that literature itself is, in a sense, sacramental. Roman Catholicism, by maintaining a

belief in real presences,⁷ keeps open a space for the sacramental power of language. In the Catholic imagination, God, humanity, nature and language *still* participate in each other. The belief in the possibility that God is present in the everyday reality of existence is a fundamental aspect of Catholic art and, particularly, Catholic fiction. If a work of art lacks this dimension, it is not, in any meaningful sense, Catholic. At the same time, it is this sacramental dimension of the religious imagination that allows Catholic literature to have just about anything as its subject matter. Catholic literature does not need to be about explicitly Catholic content. Novels do not need to focus on priests and nuns, or even on Catholic dogma or ritual, because for artists in the Catholic tradition, any and all subject matter can reflect the divine presence since signs of divinity are present throughout all of creation.

In this sense, we can fully appreciate and agree with Marian Crowe's definition of Catholic literature as, "a work of substantial literary merit in which Catholic theology and thought have a significant presence within the narrative, with genuine attention to the inner spiritual life, often drawing on Catholicism's rich liturgical and sacramental symbolism and enriched by the analogical Catholic imagination" (24). A Catholic author does not necessarily need to subscribe to all of the tenets of Catholicism (indeed, in the twenty-first century it becomes nearly impossible to find one who does), but he or she must engage with them. For the purposes of this study, I have restricted the focus even

⁷ My use of the phrase 'real presences' refers to the belief in transubstantiation, but is also intended to invoke George Steiner's 1989 work, *Real Presences*, which argues that "any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence," and that "the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art of music...is a wager on transcendence" (1-2).

further, including only authors who self-identify as Catholics (or who did at the time they wrote the fiction under discussion).⁸ I do this not because I believe they are the only Catholic authors worth studying, but because by engaging with writers who have consciously chosen to place their work within the Catholic literary tradition we will be able to see the contours of the pattern of the religious imagination even more clearly.

Catholic Violence

Now that we have established the scope of the works under discussion, we need to further clarify how and why the violence present in these Catholic texts is different from the violence in non-Catholic literature. If, as I argue, there is something unique about the Catholic imagination and its embrace of violence as an aesthetic strategy, we need to differentiate this Catholic approach from those taken by artists shaped primarily by secular constructions of reality. This is not a simple proposition, since there is no denying that American literature has been, from the very beginning, violent,⁹ and twentieth century American literature is even more so, culminating in orgies of blood like *American Psycho*, *Blood Meridian*,¹⁰ or any number of Stephen King novels. Even

⁸ The one exception to this is David Foster Wallace, whose inclusion will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

⁹ The definitive account of the workings of violence on the creation of the American psyche is Richard Slotkin's *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (2000). Slotkin argues, "In American mythogenesis the founding fathers were not those eighteenth-century gentlemen who composed a nation at Philadelphia. Rather, they were those who...tore violently a nation from implacable and opulent wilderness" (5). Slotkin draws on early American history and literature to demonstrate how, "Regeneration ultimately became the means of violence, and the myth of regeneration through violence became the structuring metaphor of the American experience" (5).

¹⁰ McCarthy was raised Catholic, and his use of violence makes an interesting parallel to the works studied here. For more on the connection between McCarthy's use of violence and his religious views see particularly Hall and Wallach's *Sacred Violence* (2002, 2 Volumes), Ciuba's *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction* (2007), and O'Gorman's "Violence, Nature and Prophecy in Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy" (2010).

contemporary young adult literature is intensely violent, a trend best represented by Suzanne Collins's disturbingly graphic (and excellent) young adult trilogy *The Hunger Games*, in which children are forced to murder each other for sport.

The reasons behind the violent nature of American fiction, particularly contemporary American fiction, have been the subject of numerous critical approaches. The most common explanation for its ubiquity is that violence is representational of social or cultural forces at work in America. James Giles, in *Violence in the Contemporary American Novel* (2000), argues that since we live in "a world in which exploitation and death are ever present... violence [in contemporary fiction] has ceased to seem extraordinary"; and because of this, violence in fiction "is depicted... as 'structural,' 'systemic,' as a kind of random totalitarian force" (6-7). While for Giles American society as a whole is violent, other critics identify specific social or cultural forces as driving societal violence; most focus on some aspect of the inequalities present in race, gender, and class dynamics as the underlying cause for the violence.¹¹ For these critics, violence is present in fiction because violence is present in society; we live in a world where the powerful prey upon and exploit the weak, and one of the functions of critical inquiry is to identify the causes of these moments of violence in order to move towards eliminating them. These critics argue that fiction writers write about violence either because they are reflecting what they see in society or because they, too, want to identify and eradicate the causes of societal violence.

¹¹ See, for example, Chandra's *Narrating Violence, Constructing Collective Identities* (2009); Ledbetter's *Victims and the Postmodern Narrative* (1996), Redding's *Raids on Human Consciousness* (1998); Shaw's *The Modern American Novel of Violence* (2000); Tanner's *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1994); Wesley's *Violent Adventure: Contemporary Fiction by American Men* (2003).

Theologian Walter Wink provides an alternate account of the pervasiveness of violence in American literature and culture. He claims that violence is an integral aspect of American self-identity, which manifests itself in what he terms the “Myth of Redemptive Violence,” the internalized belief that “the victory of order over chaos [is only accomplished] by means of violence” (“Facing”). Wink contends:

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. . . . Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, first resort in conflicts. (*Engaging the Powers* 13)

The end result of this ideology leads one to believe that the “death of . . . evil beings is necessary in order to cleanse society of a stain,” and that consumers raised on media that perpetuates this mythos, “far from feeling remorse at another human being’s death, [are] actually made euphoric” (20). In Wink’s formulation, “violence has become an aphrodisiac, sheer titillation, an addictive high, a substitute for relationships. Violence is no longer the means to a higher good, namely order; violence becomes the end” (“Facing”).

While some Catholic authors address this myth of redemptive violence head-on (see, for instance, my discussion of Tim Gautreaux’s work in Chapter Three), and others write fictions in which the violence can certainly be viewed as a product of the power dynamics at work in society, explorations of the origins of violence are not a central concern for Catholic authors. Rather, Catholic authors employ violence as a way to write about the experience of encountering God, or grace. The violence in contemporary American fiction written by Catholics can be described as both the defining characteristic

of the dramatic structure of the work and an integral part of the aesthetic strategy employed by the authors to shape the reader's experience of the work. This aesthetics of violence is never incidental to the plot; it is one of the determining factors in the dramatic structure of the story. And while the causes of violence in the fiction might be reflective of the power dynamics at work in society, these authors are interested in violence primarily for what it does to the individual character and reader. In Catholic fiction, the violence is not an end in itself; instead it functions as a catalyst that leads the characters within the story towards a moment of insight or self-reflection, and this is often tied to the experience of mystery, or that which defies, transgresses, or even transcends the ego of the self. Ultimately, this experience of disorientation and decentering can, in Catholic fiction, become an experience of the Divine. In addition, Catholic authors consistently use violence as a means to unsettle their audience and force their readers to ask questions about what just happened in the story, and why. For the Catholic author the answers to these questions point beyond the texts to a sacramental worldview that includes the possibility of the presence of God.

Historian Steven Schloesser writes about this connection between the experience of trauma and the move towards Catholicism in 1920s France, where, for a period of time, "Catholicism came to be imagined by certain cultural and intellectual elites not only as being thoroughly compatible with 'modernity,' but even more emphatically, as constituting the truest expression of 'modernity'" (5). In Schloesser's formulation, the Catholic sacramental understanding of reality became fashionable because, for a culture struggling with the aftermath of the horrific trauma of the Great War, Catholicism

supplied “hope that genuine transformation [was] possible in ways we cannot see” (8). The trauma of the war undermined the assumptions of “liberal rational culture in the period of empire,” and its “prewar values, meanings, and self-identity as a ‘civilized’ society” (9). Once disabused of this self-conception, many intellectual elites sought “a dialectical synthesis” of “the positivist’s observed world as well as something else unseen” (7). Catholicism, with its sacramental view of existence, became of a piece with other avant-gardisms, “surrealism, magical realism, and socialist realism,” whose “only common denominator was a rage against the modernity of liberal rationalism” (16). Schloesser’s historical study encapsulates the process that is enacted within contemporary Catholic fiction, where violence and trauma undermine traditional narratives of scientific triumphalism, thereby leading to a search for alternative views of “the real,” which might include that which cannot be empirically understood.

In many instances, Catholic authors, especially those of the early part of the twentieth century, employ violence to reflect the failure of ‘liberal rationalism’ to work as a comprehensive worldview. Or, in the language of Catholic doctrine, the violence in these fictions points to the fallen nature of the world. Characters are violent because in a world that does not believe in or value the idea of a divine or transcendent reality, there is, as Flannery O’Connor’s *Misfit* puts it, “no pleasure but meanness” (*Works* 152). This religious worldview shapes much of the fiction written by Catholic authors, where contemporary society is represented as “territory held largely by the devil” (*Mystery* 118). The violence that permeates the fiction of many Catholic writers can be traced back to this fundamental notion: for a society that does not see any inherent value in life, there

is little to stop the spread of violence. But, paradoxically, for these writers, the point is not that the world is violent *because* God is absent. Quite the opposite. For O'Connor, Percy, and the Catholic authors who follow their lead, God is present amidst the violence, and the violence becomes a possible opening for God's presence.

This gets to the very heart of the Catholic aesthetic, which is based on a belief in God's presence, not absence, in all aspects of the world. For the Catholic writer, then, violence, even horrific violence, is not an indication that God is absent from the world, even though it may initially appear this way to both characters in, and readers of, the story. Catholic metaphysics suggest that the encounter with the divine is an objective experience, outside of one's subjective control, and thus if God is to be encountered it will be existential as well as sacramental. The project for the Catholic writer is to locate God's presence even in, perhaps precisely in, these moments of violence. This is not to say that God is the cause of violence (although there is critical debate over just this issue with regard to O'Connor's use of violence in her fiction); rather, Catholic writers explore the way that God can be manifest in, or after, violence. As O'Connor states, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace" (*Mystery* 112). Violence is not an end unto itself; instead, it becomes a kairoic moment,¹² in which the individual can make a definitive change in who she is and what she believes.

¹² My understanding of a kairoic moment as a divinely initiated experience that allows for personal (or universal) transformation is indebted to Protestant theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich explains that, "kairos in Christianity has a connotation beyond the original Greek 'timing.' In Christian usage...it is a state of things in the world which makes the appearance of something divine possible. There are always those two aspects – the conditions themselves and the intervention of something beyond time and space, coming into time and space" (126).

In order to bring about this change, Catholic writers often use violence in a manner that is strategically anti-ironic and anti-postmodern, in that the history of Catholic intellectual discourse maintains that language in general, and fiction in particular, can embody universal meaning and signification. Tracy's *The Analogical Imagination* is a particularly compelling account of the Catholic conception of the limits and capabilities of language to shape and convey experience. He writes, "The actual experience of the work of art can be called a realized experience of an event of truth...when I experience any classical work of art, I do not experience myself as an autonomous subject aesthetically appreciating the good qualities of an aesthetic object set over against me. Indeed...I find that my subjectivity is never in control of the experience. ...Rather the work of art encounters me with surprise, impact, even shock of reality itself" (111). Tracy intimates that the encounter with the work of art calls into question the primacy of the isolated individual, and offers a glimpse into an objective reality beyond the limits of personal subjectivity.

This position is in line with the Catholic intellectual tradition, which holds that texts, primarily scripture, embody meaning on four levels: "historical or literal, allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical" (Aquinas 1.1.10). The anagogical aspect of this form of exegesis points to a spiritual dimension of existence that is to be discovered within the text. Catholic authors are writing out of a tradition that values and believes in the multiplicity of meanings behind the written word; for this reason Catholic authors are committed to the view that reading fiction can be a profoundly moving and affecting experience. This Catholic intellectual tradition also stresses the phenomenon of

conversion; that people can profoundly change after meaningful encounters with God and/ or His word. In Catholic culture, these moments of conversion are often depicted as violent (Saul of Tarsus is blinded on the way to Damascus), or as coming on the heels of violence (Ignatius of Loyola reading *De Vita Christi* as he recovered from a brutal war injury). For those steeped in the Catholic spiritual tradition, then, moments of violence, and moments of reading, can be encounters with God. One of the challenges, though, for the Catholic artist in a secular age is that these archetypal models of conversion no longer seem entirely credible. The idea that God speaks in flashes of blinding light sounds more like a myth or fable than a meaningful or real experience. How can an author make the experience of the divine credible in a disbelieving, even apathetic, age?

This is one of the central concerns of William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo* (1960), which lays out an argument for how the Catholic imagination helps shape the contours of theme and character in literature. In Lynch's account, all fiction, but particularly fiction that seeks to capture some aspect of the relationship between the human and the transcendent, needs to be grounded in specifics, or what he calls "the definite"; for Lynch, any attempt to write about the full breadth of experience that relies on purely imaginative abstractions will fail. Fictions that attempt to capture the experience of encountering the divine without a solid grounding in the particulars of everyday lived experience "very often produce, not the mysticism or the dream or the power of the poetry they seek, but...the ridiculous" (36).

Lynch, like Tracy, describes the Catholic imagination as analogical, meaning it approaches the world seeking out similarities and congruities between ideas and objects,

while at the same time maintaining the uniqueness of each individual thing it comprehends. He differentiates this from a univocal imagination, which seeks to erase all differences into one totalizing narrative (an ‘either/ or,’ fundamentalist approach), and from an equivocal imagination, which emphasizes only differences and dissimilarities (a relativist approach). His account of the analogical imagination includes one of the central theoretical frameworks underlying my project: that “the path to whatever the self is seeking: to insight, or beauty, or, for that matter, to God...must go through the finite, the limited, the definite” (16).

The congruities and similarities of the analogical imagination must be grounded in an encounter with “the real.” In the novels and stories that I discuss in the following chapters, this encounter is often envisioned as a violent one, for a variety of reasons. In some instances, “the finite, the limited, the definite” is itself a violent space/ person; on occasion the process of being grounded involves a moment of [violent] contact; and sometimes violence is present because change is dependent upon the spiritual drama that Catholic tradition often refers to as “dying to self.” This Lynchian parabola of movement, from mistaken worldview, to encounter with the finite, and on to a reciprocal movement to new insight, is similar to the hermeneutical model put forth by French theorist Paul Ricoeur, where, in *The Symbolism of Evil* (1967), he describes a necessary movement from a first to second naiveté. The movement between these stages requires what he calls a “critical distance,” where we become disabused of our false views of existence.¹³ It is

¹³ Ricoeur links this movement to the role of criticism itself. In *The Symbolism of Evil* he writes, “if we can no longer live the great symbolisms of the sacred in accordance with the original belief in them, we can, we modern men, aim at a second naiveté in and through criticism. In short, it is by *interpreting* that we can

my contention the Catholic authors I am studying use violence as the means of achieving this critical distance, both for their characters, but also for their readers as well. For both Lynch and Ricoeur, the path to true insight involves a direct encounter with the often violent realities of experience; and insight comes about not because one is able to move beyond this reality, but rather because one is able to embrace it and accept it as part of what it means to be human.

With this theoretical model in mind, we can see that although incidents of violence in Catholic and non-Catholic texts may appear very similar on the surface, the aesthetic purpose behind this violence is radically different. Authors whose imaginations have not been shaped by Catholicism would not use narrative violence as a vehicle for grace (either within the stories themselves, or in relation to the reader). They may indeed wish to shock their readers, perhaps into a reevaluation of the violence inherent in contemporary America, or perhaps just into some sort of somatic response that breaks through early twenty-first century American anhedonia and malaise,¹⁴ but it is extremely unlikely that the violence in these works is present because the author wants to initiate some sort of anagogic epiphany for the reader. And it is just this epiphanic experience that underlies the engagement between author and reader in Catholic fiction. The use of violence is a fundamental strategic tool in Catholic writers' approach to manifesting the divine in an increasingly secular age.

hear *again*" (351). For a helpful overview of Ricoeur's understanding of the first and second naiveté, see Chapter 3 of Mark Wallace's *The Second Naiveté: Barth, Ricoeur, and the New Yale Theology* (1995).

¹⁴ Marco Abel's *Violent Affect* (2007), for instance, is primarily concerned not with the meaning of violence in literature, or what it represents, but with what the encounter with literary representations of violence actually does to the reader "in terms of affect and force" (x).

What Happens to Us When We Read, and Why Does It Matter?

My repeated claims that Catholic authors use violence in order to affect the reader are at odds with many contemporary theoretical assumptions about literature, and thus need further clarification. My entire project is based on a set of theoretical principals about the meaning and value of literature, which are most clearly articulated by Paul Ricoeur, although the insights and formulations are not exclusively his. The theoretical framework is two-fold. First, it is premised on the belief that there is an ethical value to literature, because reading has real world effects; or, in other words, literature is meaningful in part because it does something to the reader. Second, the questions of exactly what it does and how it does it are in large part determined by time and place, both of the textual composition and of the reader's encounter with the text.¹⁵ My point, though, is not to evaluate literature on its ethical values, but rather on its aesthetic ones – how well does the structure of a text accomplish what it is has been constructed to do?

The concept that literature can do something to a reader is a position that Wayne Booth has been persuasively arguing for many years, particularly in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) and *The Company We Keep* (1988).¹⁶ Booth claims, “When human actions

¹⁵ This approach to literature and criticism is related to, although not synonymous with, reader-response criticism, but Ricoeur's formulation of the exchange between author, text, and reader is, for me at any rate, a more persuasive account than those of Iser or Fish.

¹⁶ Of course, Booth is just one of many contemporary critics who have argued for the moral dimension of literature. John Gardner, in *On Moral Fiction* (1978), claims that “true art is moral: it seeks to improve life, not debase it” (5). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum argues, like Booth, that, “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative arts” (5). Nussbaum's work is less invested than Booth's in the idea that literature does something to the reader, although she does acknowledge “people care for the books they read; and they are changed by what they care for – both during the time of reading and in countless later ways more difficult to discern” (231). Her fundamental thesis is that literature can serve as a training ground for the moral and ethical imagination, and that “certain literary texts...are indispensable to a philosophical inquiry in the ethical sphere: not by any means sufficient, but sources of insight without which the inquiry cannot be complete” (23-24).

are formed to make an art work, the form that is made can never be divorced from the human meanings, including the moral judgments, that are implicit whenever human beings act. And nothing the writer does can finally be understood in isolation from his effort to make it all accessible to someone else – his peers, himself as imagined reader, his audience” (*Rhetoric* 397). In *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Booth contends that writers have a moral duty to make their meanings clear: “The ‘well made phrase’ in fiction must be more than ‘beautiful’; it must serve larger ends, and the artist has a moral obligation, contained as an essential part of his aesthetic obligation to ‘write well,’ to do all that is possible in any given instance to realize his world as he intends it” (388). Booth is arguing that since fiction can and does have an effect on the reader, the author must be careful not to unknowingly lead the reader astray through unintentional ambiguity. Booth’s concerns with regard to the ethical dimensions of literature speak to a very real concern for many Catholic authors, who may be concerned about the effects of their writing on their readers’ moral, and spiritual, lives. Jacques Maritain, in *Art and Scholasticism*, articulated the clearest Catholic response to this ethical dimension of fiction: “If you want to produce Christian work, be a Christian, and try to make a work of beauty into which you have put your heart; do not adopt a Christian pose. . . . If you were to . . . turn the desire to edify into a method of your art, you would spoil your art” (55).

Booth returns to the subject of the author’s moral obligation in *The Company We Keep*, where he tempers his earlier claims and permits greater freedom for moral

Marshall Gregory provides a helpful overview of contemporary ethical criticism in “Redefining Ethical Criticism” (2011); I agree with his position that ethical critics should focus on the two things critics “can actually make arguments and produce evidence about, the two perspectives of ethical invitations and aesthetic tactics”; in the chapters that follow my focus on the aesthetic of violence attempts to put this into practice.

ambiguity. In large part, he allows for this because in this later book gives more credit to a communitarian approach to reading and interpretation. He coins the neologism “coduction” to account for the way readers find meaning in a work of art; he believes that everything we read is tested and validated in relation to everything else we have read and experienced in our life. For Booth, reading and interpretation are actions best done in community; he writes, “in short, we do not first come to know our judgment and then offer our proofs; we change our knowledge as we encounter, in the responses of other readers to our claims, further evidence” (*Company* 76). For Booth, part of the responsibility of the literary critic is to contribute to this coduction process, to help other readers and critics gather more evidence regarding the meaning and value of a work of art.

In part, *The Company We Keep* was written to counter the reader-response claim that meaning resides entirely in the reader, or reading community; rather, Booth argues, meaning resides in the interplay between what is present in the text and what the reader(s) bring to the reading experience. Booth believes that art contains intrinsic moral values, either good or bad, and that experiencing the work of art involves being exposed to these values; the entire book is an argument based on the premise that what we read changes us and the way we view the world. He describes the moral value in a work of art as “potential energy” stored in the text, or as meaning that is present but that can only be unlocked by the reader. He writes, “The question of whether value is in the poem or in the reader is radically and permanently ambiguous, requiring two answers. Of course the value is not there, *actually*, until it is actualized, by the reader. But of course it could not

be actualized if it were not there, *in potential*, in the poem” (*Company* 89, emphasis in original). This is a central idea for my project, since I am arguing that writers of Catholic fiction use violence in their texts as a means of converting this “potential energy” to actual experience for the reader.

Paul Ricoeur’s theory of reading also prioritizes both the way the text is constructed by an author and the role of the reader in constructing the meaning of the text.¹⁷ These two dynamics only become meaningful when placed in contact. My understanding of the function of violence in contemporary Catholic literature relies on this interplay between textual object and reader’s construction of meaning in reaction to what is present in the text. Ricoeur’s classic works *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and Surplus of Meaning* (1976) and *Time and Narrative I-III* (1984-86) deal with his post-structuralist account of interpretation. For Ricoeur, the way meaning is constructed in the experience of reading is, in Mario Valdes’s helpful description, “less the projection of the reader’s prejudices into the text than the fusion of horizons that occur when the world of the text and the world of the reader merge into each other” (38). In Ricoeur’s formulation, the experience of reading is about the productive dialectic generated by the encounter between the differing worldviews of author/ text and reader: “the interplay between differences and resemblances...makes way for the revelation of a new dimension of reality and truth” (*Interpretation* 68). Or, again, “only when the world of the text is confronted with the world of the reader...does the literary work acquire a

¹⁷ Ricoeur, as a devout Protestant, was deeply engaged with the dialectical tendencies of the Christian tradition and its understanding of a text as manifestation and revelation.

meaning in the full sense of term, at the intersection of the world projected by the text and the life-world of the reader” (*Time 2* 160).

The role of the critic, then, as elaborated on in *Time and Narrative*, is an exploration of the three levels of mimesis: mimesis1, the attempt to understand the cultural milieu out of which the text was produced; mimesis2, how the text itself is constructed; and mimesis3, how the text is read/ understood in a specific time and place. In “Between the Text and Its Readers” (1985), Ricoeur’s most accessible account of the relation between author, text, and reader, he restates this tripartite role of the critic succinctly: “Three moments need to be considered...1/ the strategy as concocted by the author and directed towards the reader; 2/ the inscription of this strategy within a literary configuration; and 3/ the response of the reader considered either as a reading subject or as the receiving public” (390). In the chapters that follow, I draw on this three-fold approach to critical interpretation to elucidate the aesthetic strategies employed by Catholic authors, trying to trace out both what strategy an author might be using as well as the rhetorical tools the author uses to encode this strategy within the text; I also analyze the possible effects these strategies may have upon the reader.¹⁸

When discussing narrative strategies, Ricoeur spends a great deal of effort on authorial intention – the goal of the writer in writing his/her text in a specific way. For Ricoeur, the authors intentions do matter, but only insofar as these intentions are manifested in the text itself. What the author herself claims she is doing in the text is

¹⁸ There is no way to definitively claim what effect a text will have on a given reader, and any attempt to do so will end up being reductive; the most we can do as critics is to help elucidate both the strategies of the authors and the contemporary milieu of the reader, thereby hoping to illuminate how these two frames of reference might interact.

beside the point¹⁹; what matters is the narrative strategy as it is revealed in the text: “what it [the strategy of interpretation] emphasizes is not the alleged creation process of the work but the techniques by means of which a work is made communicable” (391). While I contend Ricoeur’s argument pays too little attention to an author’s stated purpose regarding his/her fictional creation²⁰ – after all, authorial commentary regarding the creation process can often help the critic to better understand the narrative strategy “concocted by the author and directed towards the reader” – he is right that the critic must not place too much weight on these claims, since the real evidence is not to be found in the author’s assertions about what he/she wanted to do with a piece of art but rather in what he/she actually ends up encoding in the text. The main thrust of Ricoeur’s argument – that we can best understand ‘1/ the strategy’ by analysis of ‘2/ the inscription of this strategy’ – is well taken.

Equally important, though, for my project is ‘3/ the response of the reader.’ Ricoeur writes, repeatedly, that the strategies employed by an author have real and demonstrable effects on the reader: “the reader is, finally, the prey and the victim of the strategy worked out by the implied author, and is so to the very extent this strategy is more deeply concealed” (“Between” 398). He remarks especially upon the reader of modern fiction, who is forced to navigate a variety of “disorient[ing],” “provok[ing],” and even “dangerous” narrative techniques (394-95). For Ricoeur, the reader’s encounter

¹⁹ Here he is, of course, defending himself against the ‘intentional fallacy,’ elucidated by Wimsatt and Beardsley: “the design or intention of the author is neither available nor desirable as a standard for judging the success of a work of literary art” (3).

²⁰ The lack of emphasis on authorial intent is a deliberate rhetorical move on Ricoeur’s part, since his argument is largely a strategic response to various strains of deconstructive theory.

with these techniques of ambiguity can ultimately be morally productive, because these techniques “require a new type of reader: a reader who responds” (395). Reading difficult modernist literature, that which provokes, shocks, offends or disorients, results in a struggle with the text, which can “lead the reader back to himself” (395). Writers, he maintains, can best “reach their readers only if they share with them a repertoire of what is familiar with respect to literary genre, theme, and social – even historical – context, and if, on the other hand, they practice a strategy of defamiliarizing in relation to all the norms that any reading can easily recognize and adopt” (402). This defamiliarizing/disorienting encounter with a strange and hostile text can in fact lead to “a dynamics of reorientation” for the reader (402), and it is just this play of disorientation and reorientation that I maintain we will find at work in contemporary Catholic fiction.

If reading is, as Ricoeur would have us believe, a dialectical encounter between the “horizons of expectation of the literary work” and the “horizons of expectation” of the reader (404), then the critic must pay attention to both the worldview that informs the creation of the text and the worldview of the current cultural moment in which the critic is reading/analyzing the work. Ricoeur asserts that one of the key questions the literary critic must ask is, “what historical horizon has conditioned the genesis and the effect of the work and limits, in turn, the interpretation of the present reader?” (409). For scholars of twentieth century Catholic literature, this becomes perhaps the key question, since the event of the Second Vatican Council radically shifted the axis of the experience of Catholicism for the members of the Church, and one must be aware of this cultural moment. But, Ricoeur cautions, the critic needs to account for this “historicizing question

– what *did* the text say?” without losing sight of the “properly hermeneutical question – what *does* the text say to me and what do I say to the text?” (409, emphasis added).

Interpretation requires both contextualization of the creation of the work of art and a hermeneutical approach to how the text functions in the contemporary age.

There are a number of studies of Catholic literature which address the historicizing question, but far fewer which tackle this “hermeneutical” one. In this study, I hope to provide an account of the narrative techniques that make Catholic novels work (if, indeed, they do work at all). Ricoeur claims, “The moment when literature attains its highest degree of efficacy is perhaps the moment when it places its readers in the position of finding a solution for which they themselves must find the appropriate questions, those that constitute the aesthetic and moral problem posed by the work” (407). In the chapters that follow, I attempt to illuminate the solutions found in the texts that I study, as well as reconstruct the questions the authors and readers must pose in order to make coherent sense of the work of art.

Catholic Literature in a Secular Age

If Ricoeur is right and one of the principal responsibilities of the critic is to determine the horizons of expectation that inform both the creation and reception of a text, then in order to properly understand contemporary Catholic literature we must have some sense of the tensions between faith and doubt that are at work in contemporary culture, and how these tensions impact the formation of literary texts. My analysis of the contemporary age is informed primarily by Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age* (2007), which provides a particularly detailed and nuanced account of faith and disbelief in

modern society. In Taylor's definition, the secularity of our current age "consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (3). He goes on to clarify the endpoint of his work: "the change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others" (3).

In this context, all twentieth century Catholic fiction is the product of a secular age, one defined by a multiplicity of choices about what and how to believe. Taylor's work focuses on "the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual" (3), and I am particularly interested in how these same conditions shape the aesthetic strategies employed by writers of fiction. Specifically, I am concerned with looking at how these conditions change for Catholic writers in the latter part of the twentieth century. Taylor writes that a "secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable" (19). The following chapters will illuminate the various strategies used by Catholic authors to make a transcendent worldview, or goals beyond human flourishing, seem viable and meaningful, particularly for an audience that does not already subscribe to such a worldview.

It is worth noting that this problem – of making the religious meaningful in a secular age – is not unique to the Catholic artist. John McClure, in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007), writes about contemporary fiction that attempts to portray a transcendent worldview without adhering

to any specific religious sensibility. He defines postsecularism as “a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity,” and writes that postsecular fictions depict “forms of faith...[that] are dramatically partial and open-ended” (ix-x). In many ways, his study identifies traits and themes in postsecular fiction that parallel the ones I will be discussing in the following chapters; many key tropes, such as “the darkening world; the retreat into local communities of refuge; the discovery, in these soulful communities, of new, spiritually inflected sources of hope; the patient dedication to reflection and self-fashioning,” are present in both strands of contemporary fiction (24). Despite these similarities, the works that McClure studies are distinct from the Catholic fiction I discuss in this study in two ways. First, his postsecular fictions do not, for the most part, manifest a sacramental understanding of existence; there is little sense in postsecular fiction that God is present in all things, or that the encounter with a work of literature can initiate within the reader a transformative encounter with the transcendent. Second, postsecular fiction prioritizes the concept of religious seeking rather than finding. Works of contemporary Catholic literature grow out of a specific religious framework – namely Roman Catholicism – and while they may not espouse the belief that only Catholicism is meaningful and true, their horizon of expectation implies the possibility for ontological truth. Faith may be one choice among many, as Taylor maintains, but in Catholic literature the experience of faith need not be totally open-ended. The ‘seeker’ approach to religious experience is certainly one viable route to the transcendent, but Catholic fiction often maintains that a committed

religious sensibility – a choice *for* rather than just the acknowledgement of choice – is equally viable, if not more so.

In Taylor's framework, the multiplicity of choices places the modern seeker into a liminal space, torn between a desire for transcendence and the embrace of human flourishing as the highest good. Taylor describes this sort of individual as a "buffered identity," and claims that the great fear, and risk, for this type of individual is that "nothing significant will stand out for it" (303); the failure to choose will result in the sense that any and all choices become meaningless. As a result of the tensions inherent in this liminal space many individuals in the modern age feel "a sense of malaise, emptiness, a need for meaning" (302). This is the position of many characters in postsecular and contemporary Catholic fiction. The key question for both types of fiction is what strategies the author uses to move his or her characters beyond this condition.

For contemporary Catholic writers, it is important to engage with, rather than simply to dismiss, the fears and anxieties of the secular age. Catholic fiction of the early twentieth century presented what might be called a triumphalist vision of the Church, wherein any conflict between secular and religious views resulted in the valorization of the religious at the expense of the secular. This triumphalist religious sensibility, which can be off-putting to non-Christian readers, is not something often found in contemporary Catholic fiction, where moments of violence are most likely to result in ambiguous outcomes that leave the reader questioning the meaning behind the events.

William Lynch's post-Vatican II work *Christ and Prometheus* (1970) helps illuminate this change in Catholic fictional practice. In this work Lynch explores the

conversation between the Catholic imagination and the predominant secularism of contemporary society, and argues that the Catholic imagination, if it does not want to be entirely marginalized, must recognize that “the modern religious man is also inescapably the secular man,” which is to say a person shaped by the secular age, an age of “autonomy, unconditionality, and self-identity” (6-7). He argues that, traditionally, “the religious artist has chosen to confirm the negative image of the secular, almost to the point of being happy about the whole situation” (31). The Catholic aesthetic of the nineteenth and early twentieth century tended to celebrate the sacred radically revealed in the secular while at the same time demonizing the rest of secular culture, but for contemporary Catholic artists who came of age amidst the Catholic literary and intellectual revival of the twentieth century the aesthetic project transformed itself into a conscious attempt to engage with, not reject, these aspects of secularity. We see Flannery O’Connor exploring the tensions between religious and secular worldviews in her work, but ultimately, for O’Connor, the secular view is repeatedly shown to be inadequate. For contemporary writers who followed her, though, like Gautreaux, Hansen, McDermott and Gordon, both religious and secular worldviews are depicted as problematic. The violence in these contemporary fictions, then, is not a simple reactionary critique of secularism; rather, it might be seen as an outcome of a dialectical relationship between the sacred and the secular.

The moment of violence can either be a symptom of the unease that attends the movement from one paradigm to another, or it can be the productive force that leads to what Lynch calls a “transformation of our images,” the necessary prerequisite for a

productive engagement between the secular and the sacred (*Prometheus* 76). Moments of violence in the fiction of Mary Gordon and Ron Hansen, for example, are often the result of a collision of secular and religious worldviews; but the outcome of the violence is not simply a strengthened and refined religious sensibility. Rather, the product of these encounters can be seen as something not entirely Catholic, but not entirely secular either. In many of the stories discussed in the following chapters, the violence results in deeply ambiguous outcomes, for the characters and the readers, and this is a deliberate decision on the part of the authors. A simple conclusion that reflects an orthodox religious worldview can be too easily dismissed as “religious” by readers disinclined to accept a religious sensibility; ambiguity, though, requires further reflection that might result in Lynch’s notion of “productive engagement.”

It is possible to read the violence in contemporary Catholic fiction as not only part of the productive engagement with the secular age, but also with the secular literary tradition. The two dominant literary modalities of the twentieth century – Modernism and Postmodernism – had their origins in the attempt by artists to reflect the lived experience of the world around them. Literary modernism arose in the period when the radical insights of Nietzsche, Freud and Darwin, who had unseated old ways of understanding the world and man’s place within it (and I use the gendered expression deliberately), were being fully internalized by the culture, and thus modernism is, in part, a response to the metaphysical crisis of meaning inaugurated by these three thinkers. How can literature adequately represent the experience of being human if we are not controlled by our own conscious will but instead driven by the unknowable desires of our tripartite

psyche, and if 'God is dead' and there is no objective truth? Can the large multifaceted plots of a realist Victorian novel, which are constructed around the logic of cause and effect and [often] rely on an omniscient narrator who is in control of the strands of plot, accurately depict such a world? For the modernists, the answer was an unequivocal "no." For many modernist writers then, the best and, perhaps, only way to faithfully render the experience of being human was to turn to highly subjective narrative forms: stream of consciousness, which does not attempt to convey reality as it objectively *is* (because no such objective reality exists) but rather as it is subjectively experienced by one individual; or the use of multiple narrators, each of whom provides conflicting accounts of what happens and why, once again undermining any sense that there is one absolute truth or metaphysical reality.

Modernism is more interested in epistemology (how do we know what we know) than in phenomenology (what we know), and, because of this, modernist fiction is most interested in the isolated individual who is trying to make sense of his or her experience. Postmodernism, which remains somewhat under-defined and is perhaps indefinable, is, in part, a critique of this modernist project of attempting to achieve even epistemological certainty. Postmodernism questions the ability of literature to reflect adequately or accurately any experience, since, for postmodernists, literature qua literature is simply words on a page, and each word is understandable only in relation to other words on other pages, not to life as it is lived outside of fiction. Hence the highly meta-textual play inherent in most postmodernist fiction. John Barth, in "The Literature of Exhaustion," writes that the once-fresh techniques of the modernist novel, such as stream of

consciousness, no longer had the ability to represent experience; post-modernists had to find a way to write despite “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (64). Rather than interrogating perception, then, postmodernists turned to an examination of representation. Not “how do we know,” but “how do we show what we know?” Postmodernists use irony and parody to question the role and meaning of literature itself, and to call attention to the various techniques that literary artists use to achieve their goals. These postmodern works, like Barth’s *Lost in the Funhouse* or Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow*, celebrate the endless possibilities inherent in the pliability of language itself while at the same time exposing an anxiety about the status of literary representation. But if Barth was right that the modernist techniques had ceased to accurately reflect the experience of reality, then his and his fellow postmodernists’ project of ironic self-reflexivity had an even shorter shelf-life.

Both modernism and postmodernism have as founding principles ideas that seem, on the surface, to be inimical to the Catholic artist. Both take it as a given that there is no such thing as objective truth, and that there is no ontological reality that exists beyond subjective experience. Postmodernism in particular, in its devaluation of the ability of narrative to convey truth, stands at odds with any religion that grounds itself in a biblical tradition. How do Catholic writers, who wish to be taken seriously by the literary culture of their day (or at least by a readership shaped by this culture), engage with these two dominant literary pathways? The answer to this dilemma changes over the course of the twentieth century, as Catholic authors in different times react to different pressures. While the desire to be an accepted member of the literary establishment was not a goal of

all Catholic artists, no true artist wants to be assigned to a religious ghetto for fiction writers, designated for practitioners of the art of didactic, treacly, “pious trash” (to use O’Connor’s acerbic phrase (*Mystery* 180)). So, by default, they had to engage with the currents of high modernism, or its postmodernist successors. Although contemporary Catholic fiction is often ambiguous, and does frequently contain characters struggling with the modernist anxiety over subjectivity or the postmodernist anxiety over the representation of meaning, Catholic fiction is also interested in showing a way beyond these anxieties. For the Catholic writer, this way out originates in the analogical imagination, and is (often) manifested through the use of violence.

The connections between secularity and religion, and between current literary forms and the form of Catholic fiction, parallel each other; in both cases, the religious orientation ignores the secular at the risk of its own marginalization. In *Christ and Prometheus*, Lynch faces the dilemma of how a Catholic-Christian approach to artistic creation can function in a secular society, where the underlying ontological belief structure of the Catholic writer is literally unintelligible for many readers. Lynch proposes that the form of Catholic fiction must engage with the age on its own terms, and thus must “give up Christian symbolism as an instrument for the understanding of our secularity” (12). The attempt to *impose* a Christian framework on the secular age will not produce good, or even sensible, art; rather, the Christian must go through what is really present in the secular age in the attempt to locate a transcendent signification in what is already there. Rather than demonizing the secular, the Catholic writer must “discover a dialectical relationship between sacred and secular” (137); likewise, the Catholic artist

engages in a dialectical relationship with contemporary literary forms. This dialectical relationship is at the heart of the best contemporary Catholic fiction, which acknowledges the anxieties and difficulties of the modern age and uses contemporary literary strategies to reflect these concerns. He or she cannot dismiss the anxieties of the age through an all too easy recourse to a cheap grace, or unearned insight. Catholic fiction in a secular age is about the struggle with doubt, and the fear of the loss of meaning, but it retains a belief in the possibility for transcendent meaning and value, beyond the limits of the purely secular. In the chapters that follow, through close readings of some of the best works of contemporary Catholic fiction, I will demonstrate the narrative techniques that Catholic writers use to point their characters, and their readers, beyond the horizon of secularity, and towards an idea of transcendence. The chapters are arranged in rough chronological order, so from chapter to chapter we will be able to see the ways that these techniques change, in both subtle and significant ways, as the relationship between American Catholicism and American culture shifts in the wake of Vatican II. Although contemporary Catholic writers often dispense with some of the overtly Catholic dimensions to their fiction, they continue to use violence as a vital dimension of their fictional aesthetic, used to point both characters and readers toward a sacramental worldview that transcends any purely secular construction of the real.

Religion and Violence, and What This Study Is NOT About

Before progressing to the individual chapters that constitute the bulk of this project, I need to take a moment to address two areas of convergence in the study of religion and violence that I will not be writing about. When we think of religion and

violence in twenty-first century America, first and foremost we think of the violence of religious extremism. Since 9/11, there has been an explosion of books on religion and violence, with the vast majority focusing on religious extremism and fanaticism. There is a clear and undeniable link between religious fundamentalism and the use of violence as a tool to oppress or suppress differing worldviews. While there will be a few moments in this study where religious fanaticism comes into play, on the whole my focus is not on the violence of religious extremists. The authors I study are not zealots, and with few exceptions, neither are their characters. The violence in these stories has a different origin and a different aim.

Another area of overlap in contemporary thought on religion and violence is the work of Rene Girard, whose influential works, particularly *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (1987), provide a compelling and comprehensive account of the relationship between humanity's violent nature and the organization of religion and culture. While there are interesting connections to be made between the authors I study here and Girard's theories, I will not be making them. There are two reasons for this. First, many of these connections have already been made, primarily concerning the work of Flannery O'Connor. John Desmond, Frederick Asals, Susan Srigley and Gary Ciuba have all written on the connections between O'Connor's work and Girard's, establishing a number of parallels as well as crucial distinctions, and I do not have much to contribute to this well-developed discussion. But the second, and more important, reason I will not be drawing on Girard's theories in this study is that while I find them to be well articulated, and fully

comprehensive, I do not find them to be entirely germane to the discussion of violence and religion as it pertains to the texts I will be studying. To put the matter in terms of formal logic analysis, while Girard's work is a sufficient account of violence and the sacred (meaning it covers the ground thoroughly and accounts for most dimensions of contact between the two areas), it is not necessary (meaning there can be an account of violence and religion that stands outside of Girard's theory while being just as meaningful and comprehensive). In the chapters that follow I will be drawing on the works of William Lynch, Paul Ricoeur, Romano Guardini, and Charles Taylor to construct a distinct account of the convergences between violence and the sacred in the work of contemporary Catholic writers.

CHAPTER TWO

THE 'BLASTING ANNIHILATING LIGHT' OF FLANNERY O'CONNOR'S ART

Any discussion of the aesthetics of violence in American Catholic fiction needs to begin with the work of Flannery O'Connor, both because O'Connor is the most prominent American Catholic writer and because her work is positively saturated with violence. Any attempt to understand the thematic concerns or technical precision of her works needs to involve some analysis of her use of violence. Fortunately, there are many excellent studies of the use of violence in O'Connor's fiction,¹ so I need not start this discussion from first principles. Critical analysis of her use of violence mirrors the overall critical commentary on her work: there are critics who are primarily interested in demonstrating how O'Connor's use of violence manifests her religious sensibility,² others who are equally invested in demonstrating that her use of violence betrays an unsound, and perhaps heretical, theology,³ and those who deny any religious significance

¹ I have found the following book length studies of O'Connor to contain the best comprehensive overviews of violence in her work: Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (1982), Susan Srigley, *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Imagination* (2004), particularly Chapter 3: "The Violence of Love"; John Desmond, *Risen Sons: Flannery O'Connor's Vision of History* (1987); Robert Brinkmeyer, *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor* (1989), and John Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetics of Revelation* (2007).

² Among the best books that pursue this course are Ralph Wood's *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ Haunted South* (2004); Richard Giannone's *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* (1989); and George Kilcourse's *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination: A World with Everything Off Balance* (2001); see also Desmond's "Violence and the Christian Mystery: A Way to Read Flannery O'Connor" (1997).

³ John Hawkes, who claimed that O'Connor was of "the devil's party," is the most often cited proponent of this position, see "Flannery O'Connor's Devil" (1962); Frederick Asals, in *Flannery O'Connor: The*

to the violence in her work, and instead approach it from a historicist perspective.⁴ There are also critics who take a ‘big picture’ approach and contend that any critical analysis of O’Connor’s use of violence says far more about the critic than it does about O’Connor. Thomas Haddox argues that the arguments of “secular, religious, and historicizing critics” regarding O’Connor’s work are, fundamentally, just expressions of “their basic commitment to their beliefs,” and that claims of objectivity in scholarship are just a pose (237). While I always seek to ground my arguments on O’Connor (and the other writers I study here) in what is present in the fiction, and not in my personal commitments or beliefs, my critical inclination is to give weight to O’Connor’s statements regarding her use of violence, and thus to view her use of violence as a vehicle for transcendent grace. This critical approach to the literary material does reflect my own belief about the value and significance of both literature and literary criticism.⁵

But while I am sympathetic to both O’Connor’s claims and aims, I do not simply accept them at face value, since the work itself is often more complicated than O’Connor’s own explanations might lead us to believe. What I seek to do in this chapter is explore a series of questions surrounding O’Connor’s use of violence. First, why does she use violence as an aesthetic strategy to point her characters and readers toward a

Imagination of Extremity, argues that the violence of *Wise Blood* is Manichean; Clare Kahane, in “Flannery O’Connor’s Rage of Vision” (1985), contends that the violence in O’Connor’s work suggests an extreme “psychological demand which overshadows her religious intent” (121).

⁴ See, for instance, Jon Lance Bacon’s *Flannery O’Connor and Cold War Culture* (1993), Patricia Yaeger’s “The Woman Without Any Bones: Anti-Angel Aggression in *Wise Blood*” (1995), and Katherine Hemple Prown’s *Revising Flannery O’Connor: Southern Literary Culture and the Problem of Female Authorship* (2001).

⁵ As explained in Chapter One, “What Happens to Us When We Read, and Why Does It Matter?” pages 32-39.

recognition of the transcendent sphere? Second, where, specifically, does the violence in her fiction come from? Third, how does her use of violence change over the course of her career? And fourth, is the use of violence an effective strategy, meaning, does it accomplish what O'Connor wants it to?⁶

While there are a number of fine critical studies on violence in O'Connor's work, almost all criticism begins with O'Connor's own writings on the subject. In her letters and essays, O'Connor describes why she uses violence, how she intends it to function within the story itself, and how she envisions it affecting the sensibilities of her readers. Although she repeatedly states that she does not want to be overly didactic in her writing, since the end result of such fiction is "another addition to that large body of pious trash for which [Catholic writers] have so long been famous" (*Mystery* 180), she has no problem declaring that she intends to make her particular, Catholic Christian worldview evident to her readers: "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" (*Mystery* 185). My primary interests are in examining just what these 'violent literary means' look like, and why they might be an effective means of imparting an author's particular understanding of existence to an unreceptive audience.

⁶ These questions correspond, roughly, to Ricoeur's three-fold definition of Mimesis; where Mimesis1 is the process of prefiguration, understanding the worldview and language use from which a text originates, Mimesis2 is the process of configuration, or the reader's construction of meaning from the text using the rhetorical strategies that are within the text itself, and Mimesis3 is the process of refiguration, "the intersection of the world unfolded by the fiction and the world wherein actual action unfolds," or, in other words, how the reader incorporates the insights of the text into his/her life outside of the text ("Mimesis" 148).

O'Connor had a clear conception of the audience for which she was writing, and it is this construction of her audience which shaped the form of her fiction.⁷ O'Connor conceived of her audience as either largely atheistic, "my audience are the people who think God is dead" (*Habit* 92), or at least unconcerned with the spiritual realities that she saw as the foundational principle of existence: "I have found that what I write is read by an audience which puts little stock either in grace or the devil" (*Mystery* 118), and "Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental" (*Mystery* 162). In perhaps her most descriptive statement on her imagined audience, she explains:

When I sit down to write, a monstrous reader looms up who sits down beside me and continually mutters, 'I don't get it, I don't see it, I don't want it.' Some writers can ignore this presence, but I have never learned how. I know that I must never let him affect my vision, must never let him gain control over my thinking, must never listen to his demands unless they accord with my conscience; yet I feel I must make him see what I have to show, even if my means of making him see have to be extreme.⁸

Through her fiction, O'Connor wanted to force her readers to see reality as she saw it, so that they might reassess their assumptions about the nature of existence. She described this as her "prophetic function of recalling people to known but ignored truths" (*Conversations* 89). This movement towards the initiation of some process of reflection and reassessment is also the thematic focus of most of her fiction; she does to her characters what she wishes to do to her readers, usually through some moment of

⁷ For more on O'Connor's conception of audience see Lamar Nisly's *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics, and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Constructions of Audience and Tone in O'Connor, Gautreaux, and Percy* (2011), and Joanne McMullen's *Writing Against God: Language as Message in the Literature of Flannery O'Connor* (1996).

⁸ O'Connor made these remarks in a lecture at Georgia State College for Women, 1/7/60; the quote is published in Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor*, 45.

violence. Her stories and novels repeatedly focus on individuals who either feel themselves superior to religious belief, or who profess a Christian worldview but take no account of the meaning, and cost, of such belief. She then places these individuals into a moment of conflict, which is almost always violent, with the end result being that the individuals are led to reconsider what they believe about ultimate meaning and value. The violence undermines, or obliterates, characters' sense of self, and this process can lead to a reorientation of these characters' entire understanding of existence.

O'Connor's foundational beliefs about the nature of fiction are "that every great drama naturally involves the salvation or loss of the soul" (*Mystery* 167), and that, "There is a moment in every great story in which the presence of grace can be felt as it waits to be accepted or rejected, even though the reader may not recognize this moment. ... And frequently...the devil has been the unwilling instrument of grace" (*Mystery* 118). From these claims, we see that she conceived of her fiction as primarily oriented towards the questions of salvation and damnation, and that she believed in the reality of grace as a vehicle for personal transformation. My initial focus is an exploration of why O'Connor believes that the presentation of this grace requires violence. She provides us with a strong clue when she claims, "I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moments of grace" (*Mystery* 112). Two elements here require further illumination: first, O'Connor's conception of reality, and second, her understanding of free will, vis-à-vis this acceptance of grace. For O'Connor, who subscribed fully to the Catholic Church's conception of reality, humanity is sinful and fallen, and therefore finally imperfectible without God's grace. In

O'Connor's view, modern man believes exactly the opposite; he believes in self-sufficiency, progress, and the eventual eradication of all pain and suffering. Because of this, "the modern secular world does not believe in...sin, or in the value that suffering can have, or in eternal responsibility" (*Mystery* 185). This radical disconnect between her understanding of reality and her conception of her audience's understanding shaped every aspect of her fiction. She believed that for the Catholic writer to "write about a man's encounter with God" in a way that is "understandable, and credible" for a secular audience, the writer must "bend the whole novel – its language, its structure, its action" (*Mystery* 161-62).

In O'Connor's stories, the encounter with violence forces her characters to relinquish their reliance on their own self-sufficiency and acknowledge that they are not in complete control of their lives, and she ties this loss of control to humanity's need for redemption. O'Connor believed that, "Redemption is meaningless unless there is cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the secular belief that there is no such cause" (*Mystery* 33). No one (in fiction or reality) will seek out help without first recognizing their own need, and O'Connor uses her fiction to demonstrate just such a metaphysical need. For O'Connor, the process of conversion, of leaving behind one's false ideas of reality in pursuit of the truth, relies upon self-knowledge and insight, and this insight comes about as a result of grace. O'Connor wrote, "I don't know if anybody can be converted without seeing themselves

in a blasting annihilating light”⁹ (*Habit* 427); this light is the light of grace, and it is no accident that the adjectives she uses to describe it are both violent. As her letters and essays make clear, she believed violence was one of the sources of this annihilating light for her characters. The moments of violence force her characters to see themselves as they truly are, which opens them to the realization that they are not in fact totally self-sufficient, and that they do need “to be redeemed.” This insight can be the precursor to radical change.

But O’Connor’s fictional project does not end with her characters; she clearly wanted her fiction to shine this blasting annihilating light on her readers as well. In “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” O’Connor laid out her aesthetic strategy:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to his hostile audience. When you can assume your audience holds the same beliefs as you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you 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 and startling figures. (*Mystery* 33-34)

The violence in O’Connor’s work is her attempt to shock her audience into seeing reality anew. Christina Bieber-Lake describes this artistic strategy as “O’Connor’s ‘shock and awe’ campaign...against her readers, whereby violence occurs in the effort to get people to pay attention” (27). O’Connor uses violence in order to bring her readers up short, to lead them to ask fundamental questions about what happened and why, in the hope that the end result of this questioning will be an acknowledgment of the

⁹ Language that calls to mind Saul’s blinding on the road to Damascus, which initiated his conversion into the apostle Paul (Acts 9:3-9).

fundamental mystery at the heart of reality, which (for O'Connor) is the presence, and providence, of God. This double movement, of disrupting the self-enclosed worldview of her characters and revealing mystery to her readers, is of central importance in understanding why O'Connor's fiction is built on and around violence. She wanted her fiction to both illuminate how modern individuals can come to rely once again on God, and to serve as a source of possible transformation for her readers as well; she believed that fictional violence could accomplish both goals.

As a close reading of almost any canonical O'Connor story will demonstrate, within the world of her fiction violence accomplishes exactly what O'Connor intends it to: it breaks through the façades that her characters create around themselves, and it allows (or perhaps forces) them to see life in a new way. They are transformed, or they resist this transformation and are left bereft. I will explore this process in greater detail in my analysis of "A Good Man is Hard to Find." But what is much less clear is whether or not her fiction has the impact on her readers that she desires. Any given reader's reaction to a text is a subjective experience, and it is impossible for an author to entirely control a reader's response to his or her work, but through stylistic and technical decisions an author can at least attempt to define the parameters of this response. I will focus on the ways O'Connor attempts to shape readerly perception within the fiction itself. She does this, first, by firmly grounding the violent encounters in her historical and social moment, so I begin my analysis with an assessment of a particularly religious conception of this moment in time.

O'Connor at the End of an Age: A Catholic Conception of the Post-War Moment

Although O'Connor was primarily interested in the metaphysical nature of reality, her fiction is grounded in a very specific historical moment; she described the significance of this process in "The Regional Writer": "The writer operates at a peculiar crossroads where time and place and eternity somehow meet. His problem is to find that location" (*Mystery* 59).¹⁰ Connecting the eternal moment to a specific time and place is central to O'Connor's art. Her characters are the product of the mid-century South, and they reflect the social concerns of their time and place. Many of these characters can be described as "alienated moderns," individuals who do not know where they belong in the world, and who are torn between competing world-views and are thus subsequently disoriented (the Misfit and the protagonists of both of her novels fit this model). But she also writes about individuals who think they know exactly who they are and how they fit in the world. They subscribe to a particular account of history, grounded in class and religious prejudices, and O'Connor's work shows that these individuals need to *become* disoriented, because it is only in this disoriented state that they will be able to be open to grace.

Both of O'Connor's predominant character types – the alienated individuals and the misguidedly self-assured – reflect her metaphysical concerns. The disorientation and alienation experienced by so many of O'Connor's characters is a product of a very particular mindset, shaped by an understanding of contemporary culture as being fundamentally, and perhaps fatally, flawed. O'Connor shared a mid-century belief with

¹⁰ Bacon and O'Gorman are particularly insightful about the ways in which post-war Southern cultural, political, and religious discourses helped shape the contours of O'Connor's work.

many Roman Catholic intellectuals of her time, grounded in both social reality and religious epistemology, that they lived in momentous and possibly calamitous times. In the post-war era, individuals were faced with a new set of realities, foremost among them being the real threat of nuclear annihilation, that called for what critic Robert Inchausti describes as, “an eschatological perspective on human existence – a perspective that examines all thought and culture in terms of how they would appear in the messianic light of the Last Day” (11). Inchausti’s *Subversive Orthodoxy* (2005) traces out a Christian avant-garde intellectual tradition that critiques both mainstream Christianity as “inherently reactionary, unconsciously wedded to class, race, and gender prejudices, bound by foundational metaphysics, and littered with outworn superstitions” (10), and the bourgeois middle class for “willingly compris[ing] their honor, ignor[ing] justice, and betray[ing] truth” in order to achieve “personal success, security, and happiness” (42). Although Inchausti does not include O’Connor in his discussion of subversive and radical Christians, her fiction enacts the same double critique. This should not be surprising, since O’Connor’s conception of the modern, secular age was a product of her Christian worldview. She saw the ascendancy of a consumer-driven culture, shaped by advertising and marketing, as leading to increased conformity and the subsequent loss of individuality¹¹; and her critique of the social order was connected to the mid-century religious critique of the entire secular project as steadily destroying itself from within.

¹¹ This is the position she argues for in “The Fiction Writer and His Country”: “‘Who speaks for America today?’ [the answer] will have to be: the advertising agencies. They are entirely capable of showing us our unparalleled prosperity and almost classless society, and no one has ever accused them of not being positive” (*Mystery* 34).

O'Connor and her contemporaries were concerned that the ascendancy of secular culture was undermining the very viability of religious belief, but also that the current direction of secular culture was going to usher in the end of all culture, and that the doctrine of mutually assured destruction would result in just that outcome. As she writes in "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she is part of "the first generation to face total extinction because of these [scientific] advances" (*Mystery* 41). In O'Connor's fiction, there is a very palpable sense that the historical moment in which she is writing is a time of radical, and perhaps apocalyptic, transition. O'Connor's contemporary, the Catholic monk Thomas Merton, captures the profound uncertainty of this particular historical moment, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (1966):

We are living in the greatest revolution in history – a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race: not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race, or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.

The revolution is a profound spiritual crisis of the whole world, manifested largely in desperation, cynicism, violence, conflict, self-contradiction, ambivalence, fear and hope, doubt and belief, creation and destructiveness, progress and regression, obsessive attachments to images, idols, slogans, programs that only dull the general anguish for a moment until it bursts out everywhere in a still more acute and terrifying form. We do not know if we are building a fabulously wonderful world or destroying all that we have ever had, all that we have achieved! All the inner force of man is boiling and bursting out, the good together with the evil, the good poisoned by evil and fighting it, the evil pretending to be good and revealing itself in the most dreadful crimes, justified and rationalized by the purest and most innocent intentions. (54-55)

Merton's emphasis on change, uncertainty, and contradiction captures the world as depicted by O'Connor. Her characters are, literally, at the end of one way of life, and facing an uncertain future. They will be forced to face their own mortality, and their own

illusions about themselves. In the mid-century American South, this was true for all individuals, as widespread social changes brought about a crisis of identity, but O'Connor uses this social context as an opening to explore the deeper metaphysical crisis that Merton refers to. Her response to this crisis is to write about "what we don't understand rather than...what we do" and to point her characters, and her readers, toward the presence of mystery in the world (*Mystery* 42).

Romano Guardini, the German Catholic theologian and contemporary of both O'Connor and Merton, referred to their historical moment as "the end of modern world." Guardini's view of history, and modern humanity's role within it, resonated strongly with O'Connor. In a number of her letters O'Connor commends Guardini for being an exemplar of what a public Catholic intellectual should be – a European counter to, and improvement on, America's Fulton Sheen. In particular, she was impressed by Guardini's work *The Lord* (1954), recommending it to both Sally Fitzgerald and Betty Hester, calling it "very fine" and "his masterpiece," and stating that "there is nothing like it anywhere, certainly not in this country" (*Habit* 74, 99).

Another measure of O'Connor's respect for Guardini is the sheer number of his books that she reviewed for *The Bulletin*, her local diocesan paper; she reviewed six, which is twice the number she reviewed for any other writer.¹² In the first of her reviews of Guardini's work, on *The Rosary of Our Lady* (1955), she differentiates him from many public Catholic intellectuals of the day, in that he "does not stand on a height above the modern world, coping with its agonizing problems," rather, he is positioning the Church

¹² She reviewed three books each for William Lynch, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Eric Voegelin.

amidst “modern difficulties and preoccupations” (*Presence* 17). Two years later, when recommending his book *Prayer in Practice* (1957), she ends her review by writing, “his concerns are very much for the problems of modern man, in whom faith is no more than a possibility. It is, in part, this realization of the modern condition that makes Monsignor Guardini’s work so vital” (53). And in her last review of Guardini’s work, *Freedom, Grace and Destiny* (1961), she praises him for noting how these “three interrelated concepts...in modern thought have been distorted, discarded, or diluted in a fashion that suggests Satanic influence” and she concludes her review by quoting directly from Guardini on the alienation of the Christian in the modern world: “the believer no longer stands with his faith amid the concrete, actual world, and he no longer rediscovers that world by his faith” (123). In all of these reviews, O’Connor commends Guardini for engaging with the current cultural moment, not from some predetermined religious vantage-point, as so many of the Catholic voices of her age were wont to do, but from a more open and inquisitive position.

Guardini’s work argues for an understanding of Christianity that acknowledges its marginalized position in the modern consciousness, and he writes forcefully, and repeatedly, that the Christian in the modern world needs to acknowledge the actual presence of evil in the world. But Guardini also writes about how the individual in the modern world can come to know and accept God, and what he claims is that faith must supersede intellect; reason leads us astray, but free surrender to the divine will and obedience to God is what leads to understanding. There are a number of places in *The Lord* where Guardini says that in order to come to know Jesus, “You must let go;

renounce all hope of self-illumination, fling the measuring rod of reason and experience to the winds and venture the call: Lord, come – send me your Spirit that I may be recreated!” or, again, “To become a Christian means to go to Christ *on the strength of his word alone*, to trust solely in his testimony. Blind acceptance of what remains unclear, unreasonable is part of this step and belongs essentially to the ‘foolishness’ of the crossing over” (149, emphasis in original).

It is this pattern that one finds, repeatedly, in O’Connor’s fiction.¹³ Her characters do not reason their way to faith. The experience of God is not an intellectual exercise for them. Rather, they live in a world where God’s presence becomes a palpable reality. This is the world Guardini repeatedly invokes in *The Lord*. For the Christian, he writes:

The end of the world and Judgment are not to be regarded as myths of a distant future, but as possibilities of God’s wrath that keep astride of our own lives. We do not inhabit a safe, biological, historical and spiritual unit that goes its invulnerable way under the canopy of a harmless religious mystery called God, but...both we as individuals and the world as a whole live under the ever-present possibility of judgment. Only when the protection that direct reality seems to give my obtuse senses has been partly withdrawn and the threat of God has become a personal reality, am I a believer in the full Biblical meaning of the word. (336)

Guardini advocates personal surrender to a reality beyond reason, which entails a vision of the power, and threat, of God’s judgment – a very O’Connor-esque vision of reality. Both Guardini and O’Connor believe that the modern world can only be redeemed through an encounter with Christ, but they acknowledge that not everyone is willing or able to accept the cost of this encounter. As both Guardini’s writing and O’Connor’s fiction make clear, this type of encounter can be terrifying. But for both writers, this two-

¹³ It is an attitude also present in her letters, albeit in a more nuanced way: “I believe what the Church teaches...I find it reasonable to believe, even though these beliefs are beyond reason” (*Works* 1166).

fold process of encounter and surrender is the only way beyond the existential dread of the modern condition towards true insight. Guardini ends *The Lord* by writing, “The life of faith demands a revolution in our sense of reality... a complete conversion, not only of the will and the deed, but also of the mind. One must cease to judge the Lord from the worldly point of view and learn to accept his own measure of the genuine and the possible” (535). This is as succinct an account of O’Connor’s fictional project as we are going to find. This revolution in the sense of reality is what O’Connor seeks to achieve in her fiction, both in her characters and to us as we read her work – that we might come to see old things in a new and radical light.

Encountering the Other: O’Connor and the Social Dynamics of the Post-War South

Although the violence in O’Connor’s fiction invariably points her characters and her readers towards a metaphysical reality, the violence itself always originates in a well-defined social setting. While O’Connor’s fiction is, as she contends, about the state of humanity in a fallen world, it also contains an important social dimension as well, and to separate the religious significance from the social one is a mistake. While her characters do often take on near-mythic significance, they are also the product of a clearly defined time and place: the Post-World War II American South. O’Connor is a fiercely contemporary writer, and the “freaks” that she writes about are products of, and directly reflect, the changing social dynamics of the time period in which she was writing. O’Connor’s stories are built around a pattern of violence, disorientation and reorientation; the violence is most often brought about by the collision of worlds, and these worlds collide because that was what was happening in the time and place she was writing, as

the American South was becoming more acculturated into mainstream American cultural life. It is significant that the central conflict of her fiction, that which brings about the opening for grace and transformation, is a collision of worlds because her fiction, in a very real sense, also initiates just such a collision of differing worldviews, as her religious vision comes into conflict with her imagined readers' secular one.

In her letters and essays, O'Connor constantly comes back to the idea of grounding good fiction in the real, because "to my mind it is the only thing that can cause the personality to change" (*Habit* 503). She writes that a novelist must "be a describer of the real," and his or her fiction must go through surfaces to the mystery that lies underneath (*Mystery* 40-42).¹⁴ Anything that skips the grit of everyday life, and resorts to sermonizing or moralizing, is "sentimental" and lacks artistic merit (*Mystery* 148). In order to save her work from this abstracted sentimentalization, she built her stories upon specific social contexts. In her fiction, we repeatedly see representatives of the old southern order coming into conflict with people who challenge the presuppositions of this order.¹⁵ These conflicts result in violence, and the possibility for transformation, but they only come about because of the changes that were taking place in the post-war South. After the Second World War, the South faced increasing pressure to conform to the rest of the nation. While "economic, social, and cultural peculiarities" had traditionally divided the South from the rest of the nation (Grantham 4), the tensions of the Cold War

¹⁴ This is an idea which O'Connor borrowed from William Lynch's *Christ and Apollo*. For more on Lynch, see Chapter One; for Lynch's influence on O'Connor, see "Chapter Three: The Christic Imagination," in Kilcourse's *Flannery O'Connor's Religious Imagination*, and "Chapter One: The Metaphysical Foundations of O'Connor's Art" in Desmond's *Risen Sons*.

¹⁵ For more on the collision between competing worldviews, see Bacon.

required the United States to be unified and the perceived backward nature of the South “could no longer be tolerated” (Cobb 37). After World War II, the traditional insularity of the South gave way to “economic development and diversification, industrialization and urbanization, [a] dynamic middle class, and rising income and consumer-oriented lifestyle” (Grantham 339). Historian Pete Daniel describes the same process in different terms: “the consensus” among Southerners of the dominant class “that had treated the Civil War as a lamentable but heroic interlude, had cast reconstruction as a diabolical federal intrusion, had portrayed African Americans as inferior, and had conflated the Lost Cause, segregation, and religion began to fracture in the 1950s” (293). O’Connor’s fiction illustrates both this fracturing and its repercussions.

O’Connor’s work often brings together figures that represent the insularity of an older Southern mindset with figures who had existed outside, or on the margins of, the dominant class that gave rise to this worldview. Many of her heroines are Southern white women of property who are fixated on notions of class, propriety, and dignity, and who are distrustful of outside influences, especially those of foreign (primarily European or Catholic) origin. These women encounter figures that force them to question their long-held prejudices and beliefs, and the result of these encounters is often violent, leading to the destruction of people and property. But these encounters also create a space wherein the representatives of the older order can change their beliefs, leading to the possibility of meaningful progress. For O’Connor, this progress is simultaneously social and spiritual, although she surely felt that the spiritual aspect was the more significant dimension of these violent encounters.

Joel Williamson describes the southern white elite class as being “a happy people, because they felt they knew who they were, where they were, and why they were there” (223). Clearly, many of O’Connor’s heroines fit this mold; a non-exhaustive list of such women includes the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” Sally Poker Sash in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” Mrs. Cope in “A Circle in the Fire,” Mrs. McIntyre in “The Displaced Person,” Mrs. May in “Greenleaf,” Ruby Turpin in “Revelation,” and Julian’s mother in “Everything that Rises Must Converge.” These women are blinded by their unthinking complacency, and what O’Connor does in her fiction is undermine these women’s sense of surety. The violent encounters are structured such that they force these “happy people” to reevaluate whether they actually do know who they are and why they are where they are. For O’Connor, any such clarity about one’s ultimate place and meaning in the world that is not grounded in the Christian faith (and by this I do not mean merely belonging to a church community, but rather orienting one’s entire life around the mystery of God’s salvific plan) is misguided. O’Connor uses the social context of the time – the dissolution of formerly reified boundaries between classes and races – in order to challenge these women into reevaluating their understanding of the world and their place in it. The changing nature of the post-war South gave rise to an increase in these sorts of cultural collisions. According to Daniel, “the end of the [second world] war caught millions of southerners ‘among strangers’”; he describes this time period as one of “disorientation” (22). O’Connor uses these disorienting encounters to initiate both social and spiritual transformation. Her fiction indicates that the process of post-war modernization might lead to homogenization, but it might also provide the type of

disorienting shock that the complacent need in order to reevaluate their own worn-out ideologies.

O'Connor's self-satisfied heroines all undergo some sort of confrontation with a figure or force that we, drawing on Edward Said's understanding of the term, might describe as "the Other." The grandmother encounters an escaped prisoner, Mrs. Cope deals with three "white trash" boys, Mrs. McIntyre hosts a foreign refugee, Mrs. May wrestles with her upwardly mobile neighbors, Ruby Turpin encounters a northern-educated liberal, and Julian's mother confronts a non-submissive black woman. One party to these encounters is always a woman who, like Julian's mother, is confident enough to say, "I know who I am" (*Works* 487). According to Cobb, "cultures typically take their shape from the culture being rejected" (151); we see this repeatedly in O'Connor's fiction. In "Everything that Rises Must Converge," Julian's mother is supremely confident in her own identity because she defines it in opposition to those not of her race and lineage; in "Revelation," Mrs. Turpin's entire understanding of the world is predicated upon the belief that she and Claud are better than certain people because of their material possessions.

O'Connor repeatedly makes her heroines face the excluded Other against whom they define themselves, and this encounter is often violent. By being forced to interact with actual people instead of the idea of a type of people, her class-conscious heroines lose their sense of difference, which forms the backbone of their notion of identity. While these encounters are the result of the particular social context of the post-war South, O'Connor is primarily interested in them for their metaphysical, rather than social,

outcomes. The material conditions of the time provide the context for these life-altering encounters, but what O'Connor's is intent on dramatizing in her fiction is how these encounters lead to a reorientation of an individual's horizon of significance. These encounters do have a social significance, and they are emblematic of the radical social changes taking place in the South; it is a mistake to ignore this dimension in her fiction. But it would be a graver mistake to believe that this dimension is the sum total of O'Connor's fictional project. The violence might have its origin in the social realm, but it finds its ultimate outcome in the transcendent horizon.

“A Good Man is Hard to Find”: The Template of Violence

The paradigmatic example of this process of encounter with the Other, violence, disorientation, and, finally, reorientation is “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” One finds all of the trademark O'Connor moments in this story: dark humor, violence, grace, transformation, vision, and the possibility for change. On one level, it is a story of seemingly senseless violence, but, as in most of O'Connor's work, the violence does have an underlying sense: in this case it plays a key role in the transformation of the grandmother, and possibly the Misfit as well. Like all of O'Connor's best works, though, this story defies such simple interpretation. Among other things, it is also about the changing nature of the South, the violence of the modern world, the mistaken beliefs of the older generation and the callousness of the younger one.

Two things define the grandmother throughout the first part of the story: her desire to get her own way, which is aligned with her commitment to a false past, and her preoccupation with dignity and class, which is tied to her xenophobic outlook. She tries

to manipulate her son Bailey into going to Tennessee instead of Florida because she wants to visit “some of her connections” (*Works* 137). O’Connor doesn’t say why Bailey wants to go to Florida, but Dewey Grantham describes Florida as a symbol of “modernization and progress” for the South in the first half of the twentieth century (113). The grandmother’s reluctance to go there shows her resistance to the idea of embracing the modern world, and her insistence on visiting family aligns her with traditional southern values.

Her obsession with her own past is best exemplified in the plantation house that she remembers from her youth. Like the character of General Sash, in “A Late Encounter with the Enemy,” this house is representative of a romanticized and fictionalized past. The house did exist, but in order to make it sound more appealing, especially to the younger generation, the grandmother mythologizes it. She manipulates the past, inventing a story about it having “a secret panel” filled with treasure, in order to make it sound more attractive (*Works* 143). Her commitment to this fictive past is what leads to the family’s accident, and their subsequent destruction. O’Connor is signaling that this sort of manipulation of the past is both futile and dangerous.

The title of the story also relates to the grandmother’s belief in an idealized, romanticized past. The phrase “a good man is hard to find” enters the story during the discussion at Red Sammy’s restaurant about the deterioration of society. Within a few lines of each other we hear “people are certainly not nice like they used to be” and “a good man is hard to find...everything is getting terrible” (142). The characters are sharing and reinforcing a remembered past that is, of course, an idealization of reality.

O'Connor undercuts the myth of the golden past in the next paragraph by writing about a monkey in a tree "catching fleas on himself and biting each one carefully between his teeth as if it were a delicacy" (142). The incongruous presence of a monkey at a roadside restaurant in the Deep South calls to mind the Scopes "monkey trial," which centered on the teaching of evolution and has been described as "the event that most forcefully dramatized the struggle between Southern provincialism and the modern, secular world...the event that caused Southerners to face squarely the matter of the South and their own place in it" (Hobson 148). Within a few lines, O'Connor subtly juxtaposes two notions of the history of humanity: on the one hand there is the idealized good man of the past and on the other is the reality that we have evolved from our apelike ancestors. The "good man" is no more real than the plantation of the grandmother's daydream, as she will soon learn.

The "struggle between Southern provincialism and the modern secular world," is physically embodied in the encounter between the Misfit and the grandmother, but it is also present in the conflict between the grandmother and her grandchildren. During the car trip the children read comic books while their grandmother attempts to point out the natural beauty of their home state. John Wesley has no interest in the past or even the present uniqueness of the South, being moved only by Coke and comics. He defames the South: "Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground...and Georgia is a lousy state too" (*Works* 139). When the grandmother makes a condescending comment about a poor black child on the roadside the children barely acknowledge him; immediately after he is mentioned "the children exchanged comic books" (139). The obsessions that define their

grandmother's world, pride in the South, objectification of black people, and class considerations, have no sway over the younger generation. They are only interested in the grandmother's plantation because of the promise of riches.

The grandmother's other defining characteristic, her concern with class, is evident in the way she dresses for their car trip. She has on one of her finest outfits so that "in case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once she was a lady" (138). She is more concerned with how she will appear when dead than she is with the actual question of death. Because this is an O'Connor story, there is an accident and a moment of judgment on the grandmother, but not one based on her appearance. In the final judgment, it is not her proper clothes but her indecorous smile that is the mark of her salvation. O'Connor sets up this dichotomy between appearances and reality in order to emphasize the emptiness of the grandmother's worldview. Her notions of class create boundaries that separate and isolate her. As they drive past the poor black child she comments, "look at that cute little pickaninny" and although she is aware "little niggers in the country don't have things like we do," she feels no empathy; her only thought is to paint a picture of the child (139). It takes a physical encounter with the excluded other for the grandmother to transcend the false ideologies that isolate her.

The most significant example of her obsession with class comes after the accident, when she encounters the Misfit. The accident has shaken up the family, and for the first time we see a crack in the grandmother's façade of propriety. Her driving hat is no longer crisp and proper; it now has a "broken front brim standing up at a jaunty angle" (145). (When Bailey is taken into the woods to be killed the hat brim comes completely

off.) The grandmother's violent encounter with the Misfit forces her to discard the constructed version of reality that she prefers; it is one of many instances where violence is the primary agent in "returning [a] character to reality" (*Mystery* 112). The destruction of the grandmother's hat symbolizes the breakdown of her outward barriers, but it is the dialogue with the Misfit that reveals her inner transformation.

As soon as the Misfit's hearse-like car tops the hill we know that death has come upon the family; the only question is how they will face it. The grandmother initially tries to protect herself through ideas of class: "You wouldn't shoot a lady, would you?" and again: "I know you're a good man. You don't look a bit like you have common blood" (*Works* 147). In her mistaken worldview the concept of class rights will protect her. She cannot die because she is a lady; the Misfit cannot kill them because he is not common.¹⁶ But as noted earlier, the "good man" she refers to is a myth, and people's behavior is not dictated by their lineage. The Misfit states that he came from the "finest people in the world" but this does not change the fact that he is a murderer (147). The encounter with the Misfit forces the grandmother to see that who people truly are is not dependent on what kind of people they came from.

Through her dialogue, O'Connor succeeds in making both the Misfit and the grandmother believable as actual people and not just archetypes, but both characters' lack of proper names reveals their larger-than-life status. The grandmother, like Julian's mother in "Everything that Rises Must Converge," derives her identity solely in relation

¹⁶ The grandmother surely does consider the barechested Misfit to be "common," and her attempt to elevate his class status is merely an act of self-serving flattery. This absurd attempt reveals the depth of her commitment to a class based view of society; she is initially unable to recognize, even at this crucial juncture, the emptiness of this worldview.

to her family. Without her family connections it seems she would cease to be. The Misfit, on the other hand, derives his identity from his position as a marginal figure in society. When he describes his life experiences, it reads like a laundry list of things completely foreign to someone like the grandmother: he has been “in the arm service...been an undertaker, been with the railroads” and he has been in prison (149, sic). He has also been abroad, and she blames foreign influence for the deterioration of society: “in her opinion Europe was entirely to blame for the way things were now” (142). This is one of the few moments in the story that directly references World War II and its after-effects. The Misfit picks up this strain of thought, since he has been abroad and is a veteran. One can infer that his experiences in the “arm service, both land and sea” contributed to his present condition in life. The Misfit is a living example of the effect of the War and its repercussions on the Southern order. O’Connor brings these two people together to show what happens when these two worlds collide.

Initially, the grandmother cannot identify the Misfit: “The grandmother had the peculiar feeling that the bespectacled man was someone she knew. His face was as familiar to her as if she had known him all her life but she could not recall who he was” (146). Once she does recognize him, she tries to contain him by referring to his good blood. Her attempts to classify, and thus dismiss, him prevent her from really seeing him at all. It is only when she identifies him as another suffering person, confused and in need of love, that she recognizes him not as the Misfit, a man without a place in society, but as “one of my own children” (152). By naming him as one of her children, the grandmother finally recognizes her connection to the Misfit. The woman who wanted to travel to

Tennessee to visit her relations, and to avoid meeting the Misfit, realizes that he is in fact also her kinsman. She is able to break through her isolationist, exclusionary belief system in order to embrace someone that she has formerly marginalized. In the moment when her “head cleared for an instant,” she intuits, perhaps not fully consciously, her own role in the creation of someone like the Misfit. The class-based prejudices that she has subscribed to and perpetuated throughout her life result in the marginalization of certain members of society. This marginalization and exclusion, in the Misfit’s case, take the physical form of imprisonment, which is one way the dominant class seeks to control subversive elements.¹⁷ The Misfit is a societal outcast because people who have the same world-view as the grandmother have made him so, and imprisoned him as a way of attempting to control him.¹⁸

The Misfit, the prisoner who has escaped his imprisonment, embodies the inability of society to contain its subversive elements. He is representative of a segment of society that was more or less created by the exclusionary practices of the white elite, and has now turned violent. In this story, we see that the patriarchal system, built on the violence and oppression of slavery, contributes to the production of violent figures like the Misfit, who in turn contribute to the further disruption of order in the modern world. By naming him “one of my babies,” the grandmother recognizes that her own actions have had an influence upon him, albeit an indirect one, and that she has in some way

¹⁷ See Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 272-77.

¹⁸ It is of note that the crime he is convicted of is patricide; society locks him away for killing his father, or destroying his lineage. In this he personifies the fears of the reactionary south: he goes beyond disrespecting his family to actually killing the patriarch. The Misfit maintains his innocence, but regardless of whether or not he killed his father his imprisonment has turned him into the sort of person that society fears: a violent force that disrupts the stability of the social order.

contributed to his exclusion from society. The man imprisoned for killing his family is adopted into a new one. This moment of recognition and acceptance cannot undo the violence set in motion by a long system of oppression, but it does, perhaps, provide a view of how the systemic violence can change.

The grandmother's recognition of the authentic identity of the Misfit, not simply as a killer or as a societal outcast but as one who needs to be loved, marks her final transformation from the self-interested woman who wants only to get her own way, the woman worried about what people will think of how she looks when she is dead, to the kind of person capable of leaving her old prejudices behind. It is only when she is faced with the reality of the world that exists outside of her sphere of experience that she is able to change; and, in O'Connor's vision, this encounter is necessarily violent. If it were not for the extreme violence, the shock of the moment, the grandmother would not have spent any time considering her prejudices. After the violence forces her to rethink what she believes, and why she believes it, she is able to identify with the Other; this identification moves her beyond the constraints of her stale ideology.

We can see the grandmother leave her prejudices behind, but the religious significance of this movement is less clear. What happens in the grandmother's soul to bring about her transformation? While I have thus far been performing a primarily social reading of the work, there is a clear, overt Christian dimension to the story as well; the two are inseparable. Although O'Connor famously advised her readers to "be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies" (*Mystery* 113), one does not need to turn to such extra-textual commentary

in order to see that there is a metaphysical dimension to the text. O'Connor has the Misfit introduce this aspect himself. In a story filled with abrupt and jarring shifts in tone and plot, the Misfit's metaphysical and existential musings still stand out as particularly out of place. The grandmother, in the midst of the slaughter of the rest of her family, cries, "Jesus. Jesus, '...as if she might be cursing," to which the Misfit replies, "Yes'm...Jesus thown everything off balance" (*Works* 151, sic). After more gunshots in the woods, the Misfit once again picks up this train of thought, "If He did what He said, then it's nothing for you to do but thow away everything and follow him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can – by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness" (152, sic). It is only when the Misfit reveals how incredibly lost he is, not only socially but spiritually as well, that the grandmother's "head clear[s] for an instant" and she reaches out to him. The grandmother's touch is a manifestation of a maternal love, and while we cannot know with any certainty what has changed inside of her to lead to this action, the context of the moment, with its discussion of Jesus's presence, leads us toward interpretations that include some aspect of the Christian mysteries. O'Connor provides the reader with enough information to induce thoughtful reflection, but not enough to provide total closure or surety.

The grandmother's moment of recognition is a conversion moment, and it not only redeems the grandmother, it also leads to the potential change in the Misfit as well. Two moments mark his possible transformation. The first moment is immediately after he shoots the grandmother when he removes his glasses to clean the blood off of them.

In a story where the grandmother's conversion was predicated on her ability to see things as they actually are, his move to clean his glasses is a symbol for his taking on new eyes to see the world. Without his glasses, his eyes appear "defenseless-looking"; he has let down his guard and is receptive to a new outlook on life (153). This new outlook is encapsulated in the last line, when he tells his accomplice, "It's no real pleasure in life" (153). If one pairs this line with what he said to the grandmother about there being two choices in life, following Christ completely or else living a violent life because life offers "no pleasure but meanness," then we see a transformation taking place. By rejecting all pleasures, he rejects the pleasure of meanness/ violence as well; it is possible that he will then turn to the other choice he offered, and will then "throw away everything and follow [Christ]." ¹⁹ This line signals the possibility for personal and even social change. The violence of the modern world may be tempered by an encounter with Southern values, once they have been cleansed of their prejudices; and the violent nature of the individual might be redirected toward the good, if met with love rather than disdain.

O'Connor's Aesthetic(s): Witness and Prophecy

O'Connor uses the social dynamics of the time and place in which she lived as the concrete foundation for her metaphysical vision of the need for individuals to get beyond the aspects of their personalities that keep them separated from God and from each other, but, at the same time, she also wants to use these fictions as a spur to push her audience beyond these same boundaries. In order to achieve these goals, she crafts fictions that are,

¹⁹ This reading of the ending is in line with the interpretation that O'Connor offered for what will eventually happen to the Misfit: "the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfits' heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become" (*Mystery* 113).

rhetorically speaking, intricately structured. John Sykes provides a helpful framework for understanding O'Connor's rhetorical strategies when he writes that her "stories typically build to a climactic image – usually that of a suffering human body – to which the rest of the story points as a kind of prophetic finger. The effect of this symbol, or tableau, is to inspire contemplation, not conversation" (4). He describes the revelations in her stories, in Bakhtin's terminology, as "monologic" (4). I think that Sykes's analysis is largely correct, but incomplete. There are a number of stories that do indeed present a totalizing worldview that tends to limit the reader's ability to enter imaginatively into conversation with the work; typically, though, these are the stories where the climactic image is not the end point. In a number of her stories, and in the novel *The Violent Bear It Away*, O'Connor does not simply provide the reader with a shocking image or tableau that the reader is left to contemplate, but rather she adds some explanation, or visionary moment, that proceeds from the tableau. Frederick Asals notes this divide in her aesthetics, writing that O'Connor's early fiction focused on the movement "to, but never beyond, death," (which corresponds to Sykes's shocking tableaux), whereas her later, more mature fiction, "expanded her eschatological horizons" to reveal "final visions that move us towards the dimension beyond death" (214-15).

I agree that O'Connor's fiction tends to conclude in either of these two ways,²⁰ but I am not convinced that the stories that culminate in visions of transcendence are

²⁰ I am not convinced, though, that the differences can be attributed purely to chronology. "The Artificial Nigger," for instance, which is one of O'Connor's earlier stories, culminates in an expansive description of "the action of mercy" in Mr. Head's head and heart that is as descriptive as anything O'Connor ever wrote about the eschatological horizon: "He understood that it [mercy] grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into

necessarily superior. Rather, I find these stories to be the ones that tend to be more easily dismissed by readers disinclined to accept her theological vision. Because these stories contain a more complete and fully manifested Christian worldview, there is less room for readers who are reluctant to accept this vision to enter into dialogue with the worldview presented in the stories. At the same time, I find that much of her early fiction *does* point the reader toward the dimension beyond death, or even just beyond the purely immanent horizon of existence; these stories also resist the urge to explain what this dimension fully looks like. It is this ambiguity and mystery which inspires contemplation. In her later work, O'Connor often provides the reader with a fully developed picture of this transcendent horizon, and thus many of her later works include moments of what Asals calls "visionary awareness," in which the spiritual realm becomes fully manifest within the stories themselves (213). I think of this divide in her style as being between stories that are built around moments of witness (in the Christian sense) and stories that function as prophecy. In the former stories, the presence of divine action is implied, but not explained; in the latter ones, the divine presence is revealed. Hazel Motes is the ultimate witness, since his actions and not his words compel us to pay attention; his radical example requires some sort of imaginative response on behalf of those who encounter it.²¹ Francis Marion Tarwater, the boy who is raised to be a prophet, embodies the prophetic quality of O'Connor's work; we, as readers, know exactly what happens to

death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him...He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise" (*Works* 230-31).

²¹ The grandmother's gesture towards the Misfit fits this category, as do other fundamentally enigmatic stories, such as "Good Country People" and "Greenleaf."

him, and why he does what he does, because O'Connor explains it to us. The purpose of prophecy is to convey a clear message about God, and the prophet cannot be concerned with whether the audience is receptive to the message, he or she is only focused on getting the message right.²²

While some readers and critics prefer what I am calling her prophetic stories because they contain a more fully developed Christian revelation, I find the more ambiguous, "witness" stories to be more compelling because they force the reader to provide this aspect on his or her own. In Ricouer's terms, the two styles involve radically different processes of configuration and refiguration. In order to make sense of *Wise Blood*, for instance, the reader needs to spend time in reflection, trying to supply a level of transcendent meaning that is hinted at, but not fully explained, in the text itself. The reader is forced to do more imaginative, creative work, to supply the missing element on his or her own. In O'Connor's prophetic stories, though, this element is already there, and the reader need only accept or, as is often the case, reject it. If O'Connor truly desires to bring her readers to see as she does, she is more successful when she relies on them to imaginatively inhabit her stories and to become co-creators.

Although this divide in O'Connor's approaches to portraying divine mystery could be presented through an analysis of many of her stories (for instance in the contrast between "A Good Man is Hard to Find" and "Revelation," which is the most visionary, or prophetic, of O'Connor's short stories), I choose to focus on the way it is manifested in her two novels. In many ways *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away* are very similar

²² For more on the prophetic quality of O'Connor's work, see Nisly Chapter 3 and Asals Chapter 6.

stories: young men from heavily Christian backgrounds take drastic steps to break away from their faith traditions, they struggle with an unbelieving and uncaring world, murder people, suffer violence, and then ultimately end up being reconverted to a particularly bleak version of Christian faith. But O'Connor's depiction of these two characters, and the aesthetic strategy she uses to shape the reader's opinion about them, vary in significant ways. *The Violent Bear It Away* is clearly structured around a series of opposing voices which are competing for Francis Marion Tarwater's soul, and in the end there is no doubt about which of these discourses Francis needs to embrace. *Wise Blood*, though, lacks the same range of alternating worldviews, and provides no such clarity. Hazel Motes gives a loud and strident witness to nihilism, to the idea that, "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's no truth... 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" (*Works* 93), and the novel does not give voice to any coherent counter argument. The only alternative understanding of existence is represented through Hazel's penitential practices, which are offered without insight or commentary. I contend that this lack of explicit dialogue between competing worldviews actually draws the reader more deeply into the novel because it raises a myriad of questions that the reader must reflect on, and O'Connor does not provide any guidance toward a definitive answer. Instead, she uses the structure of the novel, particular the shift in point of view at the end, in order to frustrate the readers' expectations, thereby circumventing the easy dismissal of her Catholic vision.

Wise Blood: Violence as Witness

Wise Blood is an exceedingly violent novel, but while the violence is not limited to the sphere of events that surround Hazel Motes, my focus is, initially, on the violence that initiates Motes's conversion and the violence of his self-mortification, and then on the effect this violence has not just on Hazel, but on those who try to make sense of it, specifically his landlady Mrs. Flood. I contend that it is Mrs. Flood that O'Connor asks us to identify with, and it is her transformation that is most significant in terms of O'Connor's aesthetic strategy towards the reader.

The pattern of transformation found in *Wise Blood* is similar to the one in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," except that the main character, Hazel, occupies the role of the Misfit rather than the grandmother (which is fitting since Hazel is far more like the crazed and violent Misfit than the somewhat benighted grandmother). Like the Misfit, Hazel is a man without a family or a permanent home; he is also a veteran who has suffered violence and lost his faith because of his difficult experiences in the world.²³ The Misfit was torn between a self-centered, nihilistic worldview and a radical embrace of Christianity; Hazel's novel-long struggle is between what he wants to believe – that nothing matters – and what his nature, his 'wise blood,' leads him to believe – that Christianity is real, and that nothing else truly matters. And, like the Misfit, Hazel murders a relatively innocent individual, only to hear an act of penance at the moment of the victim's death. Although we get no definitive insight into the state of Solace

²³ For more on the influence of the war on Hazel, and the overall structure of the novel, see Stacey Peebles's "He's Hunting Something: Hazel Motes as Ex-Soldier" (2011).

Layfield's soul, his deathbed confession indicates that he is attempting to atone for his sinful past, and prepare himself for the afterlife; perhaps he, too, would have been a good person "if it had been somebody there to shoot [him] every minute of [his] life."

Of course, there are significant differences between Hazel's definitive transformation and the Misfit's possible one. If the Misfit does come to embrace Christianity, this conversion would take place because he was ultimately receptive to the grandmother's act of reaching out and positioning him as part of her own family. Hazel callously refuses to hear Solace's confession, and is seemingly unaffected by his own murderous actions. He is not shocked out of his nihilistic worldview by his own violent actions.²⁴ He, like the grandmother, needs to suffer an assault from an outside force in order to recognize that he needs to relinquish his sense of total autonomy. The grandmother's moment of transformation is initiated by the destruction of her family car; Hazel's conversion is also directly linked to the loss of his automobile. Throughout her career, O'Connor uses the automobile as a symbol for the particularly American sense of self-satisfied autonomy, the unlimited freedom to go wherever, and do whatever, one wants.^{25,26} Nowhere is this more evident than in *Wise Blood*, where Hazel's car is the dominant operative symbol of the novel.

²⁴ By murdering Solace, Hazel destroys his inauthentic double, a man who has mirrored his every act without believing that these actions have any inherent meaning, yet the removal of this inauthentic representation of Hazel's worldview does not clarify Hazel's own identity or sense of self. Solace, in other words, is not Hazel's Other, but rather just a manifestation of himself that he cannot overcome through external violence. This is why Hazel ultimately needs to direct his violence inwards, against the inauthenticity inside of himself.

²⁵ See Brian Ragen's *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus* (1989) for an insightful analysis of the importance of Hazel's automobile, specifically its connection to Emersonian ideal of freedom (5); see also Mark

Hazel's commitment to, and belief in, the power of his car is in keeping with his obsessive nature. Although he does not consciously invest the car with a transcendent significance, it serves as a replacement for his former reliance on God. As he tells the false preacher Asa Hawks, "Nobody with a good car needs to be justified" (*Works* 64). But Hazel's car is not a good one (and in O'Connor's universe, there is no such thing as a *good* car); from the moment he buys it is a broken wreck that is barely holding together. This does not matter to Hazel, because he believes it will get him where he wants to go. O'Connor is sure to point out the price of this freedom, though; when Hazel is haggling over the price of the car, he asks, "How much is it?" to which the boy replies, "Jesus on the cross... Christ nailed" (38). By the end of the novel, Hazel comes to realize the full meaning of this price. Although Hazel believes that his car is "a place to be that [he] can always get away in" (65), he cannot ultimately go anywhere, because as he comes to learn, "there was not another city" for him to escape to (117). He is utterly reliant on his automobile, to literally support him during his preaching, to deliver him from his enemies (he uses his car to murder Solace), and to finally save him in his hour of need, so when his car is destroyed, Hazel is left with nothing.

While Hazel's murder of his double was his symbolic assault on the inauthenticity that he perceives in himself and his world, the destruction of his car is an external assault on Hazel's faith in his own unlimited freedom. Once his car is destroyed, he realizes that

Schiebe's "Car Trouble: Hazel Motes and the Fifties Counterculture" for a more discursive discussion of the role of the automobile in O'Connor's fiction.

²⁶ Even the Misfit brings up the automobile when discussing his criminal actions: "I found out the crime don't matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you're going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it" (*Works* 150).

it could not take him where he needed to go. It leaves him in a moment of true existential dread, where he needs to face the reality of what he has been preaching all along: “Where is there a place for you to be? No place” (93). There is no other place for him to flee, and he is totally alone. He sits on the cliff, staring at the wreckage of his car and the “sheer washed-out red clay” and “partly burnt pasture where there was one scrub cow lying near a puddle. Over in the middle distance there was a one-room shack with a buzzard standing hunch-shouldered on the roof” (118). This desolate scene is ‘O’Connor-land,’ the harsh infertile landscape in which her characters enact their brutal dramas. Hazel takes in this sight, and tells the policeman, who has offered to give him a ride, that he is not going anywhere. Hazel, at this moment, does not seem to be contemplating the greatness of God or the depths of His mercy; rather, he has at last stopped trying to escape the reality of his predicament and is finally contemplating the facts of his existence. As he tells Mrs. Flood, “There’s no other house nor no other city” (129). Either he is alone and all is meaningless, or his inner compulsion, which has been telling him all along that he does need to be redeemed, is correct. Like the grandmother when she was faced with her death, Hazel has been brought to a place where he will either cling to his own understanding of the world, or he will surrender it and be transformed.

It appears that he makes the latter decision; he ends up blinding himself, filling his shoes with glass and wrapping barbed wire around his chest, penitential acts that he performs “To pay,” although he refuses to offer any further explanation of what he is paying for (125). And it is this refusal of explanation that makes Hazel’s story so fascinating. Because of the structure of the novel, we cannot know what has transpired

inside of Hazel to bring about his conversion, or even what sort of belief he has converted to. The narrator denies us any insight into Hazel's consciousness, because after the moment in which he contemplates the wasteland that holds the wreckage of his automobile, the narrative voice is no longer focalized through Hazel. For a few paragraphs, as it details Hazel's refusal of the policeman's ride and his walk back into town and the purchase of the quicklime that he will use to blind himself, it maintains an objective tone. And then, as Hazel tells Mrs. Flood that he plans to blind himself, the point of view shifts to her consciousness. Everything else that happens to Hazel is mediated through Mrs. Flood's understanding of it.

This deliberate shift to the consciousness of a marginal figure, just as the main character is undergoing the conversion moment to which the entire novel has been building, is a confounding decision, and, in some ways, an infuriating one. It is also brilliant, and it makes Hazel's conversion the most affecting one in the O'Connor canon. The reader, even if he or she despises Hazel (as most do), is compelled to wonder why he has done what he has done, and although there are clues in the fiction, there is no definitive answer. The ambiguity embedded in the text itself has led to one of the more animated critical debates in O'Connor studies. Just as hardly anyone writes about O'Connor without writing about violence, few critics discuss *Wise Blood* without offering some justification, rationalization, or explanation for Hazel's actions, even if it is a negative one, and the interpretive divide is not necessarily between critics who are sympathetic to O'Connor's aims and those who are resistant to them.

Among those critics who analyze the Christian themes in O'Connor, Susan Strigley offers the most eloquent, and extreme, condemnation of Hazel's actions: "Hazel Motes's violence is the outward expression of his rejection of God: he kills his conscience and blinds himself to spiritual reality" (92). She contends that Hazel's conversion lacks any real spiritual insight, and that his self-violence isolates him and prevents him from joining into the community that is a requisite aspect of true Christianity: "With his willful self-blinding at the end of the story Hazel Motes follows his closed vision to its logical conclusion, and while he thus imitates Asa Hawks in order to see what Hawks claims to see, Motes does so without any spiritual perception. His final observation of the sky before he blinds himself...is dimmed and blank, still suggesting a depth upon depth. ...he is unable to see beyond his own small universe" (65). Debra Cumberland, in one of the most recent articles on *Wise Blood* (2011), agrees, writing that since "there is not a single moment of human connection, genuine kindness, or...expression of love" in the novel (7), *Wise Blood* can only qualify as a Christian novel "because it portrays a Christian vision of hell – the path to it, the state of it" (19).

Frederick Asals stakes out a middle ground on Hazel's fate; he writes that *Wise Blood* reveals a "Manichean" vision of life (58), and describes Hazel's ultimate fate as "a thoroughgoing rejection not only of a secularized age but of life taken in through the senses at all – life in a world of matter. ... By the end of *Wise Blood* the chasm between inner and outer, spirit and matter, is absurdly and terrifyingly absolute" (56). John Sykes counters the critique of the novel as being entirely Manichean by claiming that once Hazel, "sees the error of his ways, it is not to a corrected preaching that he give himself,

but to mortification of the flesh. The implication is that the path to his salvation lies in silent action. It is as though language itself has failed him, or at least that it has taken him as far toward God as it is able to go” (48-49). John Desmond offers a similar interpretation, and defense, of Hazel’s self-mortifying actions, stating that although “this chosen purgation might be seen as an attempt at self-redemption...it is not like the self-redemption he preaches in his Church Without Christ, since he punishes his body now in order to witness explicitly to the integrity of his conscience” (*Risen* 61). Ralph Wood, too, defends Hazel’s penitential acts, stating they “are not self-justifying sacrifices meant to earn Motes’s salvation; they are deeds of radical penance offered in gratitude for the salvation that has already been won for him” by Christ’s death and resurrection (169). Since all of these critics attempt to understand O’Connor’s work on her own terms and to illuminate her explicitly Christian themes, and all are well versed in the Christian faith, why is there such wide discrepancy in interpretation over what Hazel Motes’s final acts represent?

This critical discord comes about because O’Connor refuses to give us the objective evidence we would need to make a definitive claim. In many of O’Connor’s other stories we know the eventual fate of her characters, either because she explicitly tells it to us or she provides enough details to lead us to a point where the question becomes either a simple yes or no – was the character transformed by grace (usually presented via a moment of violence) or were they not? But in *Wise Blood*, while we know that Hazel has been transformed by the violence he experiences, and carries out (against Solace and against himself), it is unclear if this transformation is a healthy one, a grace-

filled one. It certainly does not look like we would expect such a transformation to look; Hazel's violence against his own body seems crazed, and his hostility to his landlady does not seem like the behavior of a grace-filled man. Hazel, after his transformation, appears, if possible, even more miserable than he was before, and he dies alone. If this is grace, it is unattractive at best. And yet, the form of the novel indicates that something transcendent is at work here.

By shifting the narrative consciousness to Mrs. Flood, O'Connor preempts our inherent dismissal of Hazel's conversion; O'Connor provides us with a figure who asks the questions, and voices the objections, that we would like to make. And since Mrs. Flood is our proxy, her fascination with Hazel, and what his radical behavior represents, becomes our fascination as well. Mrs. Flood, like the grandmother (and really all of O'Connor's heroines), is the object of O'Connor's irony, but she nevertheless offers a sane and rational critique of Hazel's actions. When she finds him throwing his money in the trash, she is incensed that he is wasting what could profitably be used to help "the poor and needy" (*Works* 124); when she sees that he has wrapped himself in barbed wire, she says, "what do you do these things for? It's not natural" and then she clarifies that, if nothing else, "it's not normal" (126-27). She goes on to claim, "It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people have quit doing – like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats... There's no reason for it" (127). While it is easy to make fun of this list of irrational acts (and it is supposed to be funny), she is not wrong; normal people do not become self-flagellating saints. Hazel's extreme ascetical practices are not normal, or rational, but to offer a rational explanation for them is to miss the point. While they do

serve some crucial function in Hazel's own life, and the reader wonders, along with Mrs. Flood, just what this function is, in the novel itself the function of this violence is to shock, to arrest, Mrs. Flood, and the reader along with her. What does the encounter with Hazel's self-violence do to this normal, rational, generally unreflective woman, this character who voices our own concerns about the presence of such grotesque violence?

Every time Mrs. Flood learns of a new violent act that Hazel is committing against his own body, she becomes more disturbed, but also more interested. She spends her time contemplating him; he becomes a living sacrament – a visible sign of an invisible reality. He is a concrete representation of an understanding of existence that has nothing to do with monetary gain, the pursuit of pleasure or normalcy; and his witness changes Mrs. Flood. But if it were not for the violence of his actions, she would not have paid any attention to him; with each fresh act of mortification she discovers, her fascination grows. His declaration that he is blinding himself leads her to wonder, “What possible reason could a sane person have for wanting to not enjoy himself any more? She certainly couldn't say” (119). And although the chapter ends with that line, causing the question to linger in the reader's mind, the final chapter of the novel picks up with the exact same thought, “But she kept it in mind because after he had done it, he continued to live in her house and every day the sight of him presented her with the question” (120). This is the fundamental question that Hazel poses to Mrs. Flood, and that O'Connor poses to her readers – what in life is more valuable than enjoyment, and does this thing, whatever it may be, require suffering, or at least a type of surrender?

This double movement, of Hazel's violent act and Mrs. Flood's reflective questioning, provides a crucial interpretive model for O'Connor's work. The violence spurs the questions, but the questions are the things that truly matter. Reflection needs to follow on the heels of violence, if true transformation is to take place. Hazel is, for the most part, unwilling to fully engage Mrs. Flood's questions, which is a problem for some readers, since it reinforces the contention that Hazel is entirely isolated and shut-off from community, which is a necessary part of the Christian faith. But I agree with Hank Edmondson, who claims that Hazel's brusque responses to Mrs. Flood are a form of "true charity" (71); rather than attempting to "make Mrs. Flood feel better...Haze, by his manner and disposition, unsettles his landlady, causing her to question the premise of her life, and ultimately, provoking her to examine her eternal future" (71). Hazel's harsh and often dismissive responses to Mrs. Flood's questions lead her to ask more penetrating questions, just as the continuing revelations of his self-mortification deepen her fascination. After discovering that he spends his days walking in shoes "lined with gravel and broken glass and pieces of small stone", Mrs. Flood "began to fasten all her attention on him, to the neglect of other things" (*Works* 125-26). She asks him why he does it, but his rude reply, "Mind your business...You can't see", prompts her to ask a more reflective question, "Do you think, Mr. Motes...that when you're dead, you're blind?" (126). For a novel fixated on sight, Mrs. Flood's sudden interest in the afterlife, and the possibility for vision there, is an indication of transformation at work. Her interest only deepens after she finds out about the barbed wire; this leads to her questions about what is normal, or natural, and her assertion that Hazel only acts as he does because her "must

believe in Jesus” (127). After this exchange, “Watching his face had become a habit²⁷ with her; she wanted to penetrate the darkness behind it and see for herself what was there” (127).

When his broken, dead body is returned to her, she can no longer ask him any questions, all she can do is contemplate his “stern and tranquil” face, and tell him, “if you want to go on somewhere, we’ll both go” (131). Only he has already moved on, and because of his presence in her life, it seems that she will go on after him. The final paragraph of the novel indicates that she has finally consciously come to a moment of transformation; that the violence inherent in Hazel’s actions, and ultimately in his death, has brought her to a place where she will exchange one set of values, based on her own pleasure as the highest good, for something radically different, something that she cannot even accomplish on her own: “She shut her eyes and saw the pin point of light but so far away that she could not hold it steady in her mind. She felt as if she were blocked at the entrance of something. She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn’t begin, and she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light” (131). Although she feels blocked, the entire structure of the chapter, which emphasizes her progressive vision, indicates that in this moment her ability to see Hazel until he becomes the light in the darkness indicates that he will serve as a guiding

²⁷ The word ‘habit’ is a significant one for O’Connor, reflected in the title of her collection of letters, *The Habit of Being*. As Sally Fitzgerald explains in the introduction to these letters, for O’Connor, drawing on Maritain, habit did not mean “mere mechanical routine, but...an attitude or quality of mind” that shapes an individual’s conception of the world (*Habit* xvii).

light for her. In O'Connor's Catholic theology, she cannot begin this journey on her own, she needs grace to bring her along, and Hazel's witness will serve as that grace for her.

But even this final moment in the novel is ambiguous, since there is no absolute clarity about whether Mrs. Flood will try, or be able, to follow this "pin point of light." The reader is left to make the final evaluation of whether she will, or even if she should. And this freedom, of interpretation and choice, mirrors the reader's own position as they close the novel. If Mrs. Flood truly is our proxy character, if she raises our objections and is drawn past them, into the contemplation of mystery, then perhaps O'Connor is indicating that this is our position as well. Before she is drawn into the mystery of Hazel's final days, Mrs. Flood firmly believes she is in charge of her life and her actions, "she thought of her own head as a switch-box where she controlled from"; but Hazel's witness causes her to reflect on an entirely different orientation of understanding existence: "but with him, she could only imagine from the outside in" (*Works* 123). Once she begins to contemplate the possibility that there is an outside, beyond one's own sphere of influence and control, Mrs. Flood begins to wonder about her own limitations. Within the sphere of the novel, there is no absolute surety that Hazel is right, or that Mrs. Flood's intimations about the reality of a transcendent worldview are true. The reader is free to dismiss Hazel's actions as crazed and bizarre and still make rational sense of the novel, but the reader, like Mrs. Flood, is also left with a lingering question, "Who's he doing this for? she asked herself. What's he getting out of doing it?" (125). By not providing a definitive answer, O'Connor leaves us wondering. By denying the reader closure, O'Connor, in the words of her friend and official biographer William Sessions,

leads her audience in, “an act of reading that was expected to lead to the most important act of all: contemplation” (241). Both for the characters within her fiction, and the readers of it, it is this contemplation, this reflection, more than the violence that precipitates it, that will bring about transformation.

The Violent Bear It Away: Violence as Prophecy

In both *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear It Away*, the form of the novel mirrors O'Connor's theme. Since her thematic aim differs significantly between the two novels, the way she uses violence to bring about insight within the worlds of the novels is thus different as well. *Wise Blood* is a novel about belief, and the ambiguous ending, which models a pattern of coming to believe, is therefore a fitting way to capture this experience. *The Violent Bear It Away*, on the other hand, is about vocation. Francis Marion Tarwater believes in God and his great-uncle Old Mason Tarwater's vision of existence, but he does not want to submit to the authority of God. He wants to be in control of his life, of his decisions and his ultimate fate. The novel enacts a journey in which Tarwater learns that he is not fully in control, and that he must ultimately submit to the will of God for his life. Since the novel is about the process of coming to accept that which one does not want to accept, it is structured in such a way that the reader, too, is trained in a model of submission to a view of existence that s/he is initially hesitant to accept. Within the world of the novel, the reader's freedom to interpret the motives and nature of the characters is far more restricted than in *Wise Blood*, and in the end the reader is forced to either accept O'Connor's vision for the significance of events or reject it entirely. There is little ambiguity in *The Violent Bear It Away*, because in this novel

O'Connor is less interested in bringing the reader to a place of contemplation than in leading the reader to a place where s/he sees reality as O'Connor does. The result can be deeply disturbing and alienating.

If *Wise Blood* is governed by the aesthetic of witness, which points toward, but does not fully explain, the transcendent, *The Violent Bear It Away* is based on the aesthetics of prophecy, which is fundamentally about demonstrating the ways of God to humanity. The story features a fully developed prophetic figure, in Mason Tarwater, and the plot centers on young Francis's call to, and resistance against, a prophetic vocation. I focus not on what a prophetic calls means for O'Connor, since this is a topic well explored by other critics,²⁸ but rather on the function of violence in Tarwater's ultimate embrace of his prophetic role, and on the importance of submission within the novel and in the dynamic between text and reader. O'Connor, in *The Violent Bear It Away*, offers a concrete, descriptive account of the work of God, and the devil, in the world. This account is more shocking and disturbing than anything Hazel Motes had to offer. Susan Srigley finds Tarwater's journey to be more truly Christian than Hazel's,²⁹ since it is evident that Tarwater is doing the will of God by submitting to his prophetic calling to, "Go warn the children of God of the terrible speed of mercy" (*Works* 478). She argues that "the warning comes from an experience of that burning mercy, through which Tarwater has begun to understand his limits and his responsibility for others" (133).

²⁸ See especially Asals 198-233, Srigley 37-54, Wood 224-235, and Nisly 64-72.

²⁹ John Desmond agrees, writing that *The Violent Bear It Away* provides the "fullest treatment" of "the process of complexification of consciousness, implicitly based on a Christocentric model," and that in the novel "O'Connor achieved the fullest development of her analogical vision" (*Risen* 110-11).

Personally, I find Tarwater's journey to be so fundamentally unsettling that I question whether this novel can accomplish O'Connor's goals of changing her reader's vision of the world. In this instance, I agree with Gary Ciuba, who contends that in *The Violent Bear It Away*, "O'Connor's violent artistry...may alienate the very readers she seeks to attract" and that rather than leading the reader toward God, "the work becomes an obstacle instead of helping to remove the stumbling stone" (*Desire* 157).

When reading *Wise Blood*, the reader questions why Hazel is doing what he is doing, and what his actions signify. While the answers to these questions are not immediately obvious, they can point the reader toward a horizon of transcendence, as they do for Mrs. Flood. When reading *The Violent Bear It Away*, though, the reader does not ask what Tarwater is doing, because it is clear that he is fulfilling the role established for him by his great-uncle on the second page of the book: "The old man, who said he was a prophet, had raised the boy to expect the Lord's call himself and to be prepared for the day we would hear it. He had schooled him in the evils that befall prophets; in those that come from the world, which are trifling, and those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean" (*Works* 332). There is no ambiguity about Francis's motivations, or the ultimate meaning of his actions. Tarwater believes his great-uncle and knows, without doubt, what he has been called to do: "He...knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. He knew that he was called to be a prophet and the ways of his prophecy would not be remarkable" (389). The novel is thus focused not on the process of coming to insight, but on the process of submitting oneself to an insight that one does

not want to accept. Tarwater believes, but does not want to believe, because believing is tantamount to surrendering his own authority over his life. He wants to be the one in charge of what happens to him, and O'Connor structures the novel so that he, and the reader along with him, is shown, repeatedly, that he does not in fact have this control. He is literally unable to accomplish what he wants to accomplish. This is most evident when he attempts to drown Bishop rather than submit to the command to baptize him, but even in the act of drowning him he utters the words of baptism. For O'Connor, this inability to assert his own will in the face of God is the mark of his salvation; he is saved because he cannot resist the authority of God.

The Violent Bear It Away is structured around competing narratives. Every character in the novel is subjected to a variety of totalizing narratives that seek to encompass the entirety of how one should understand the world. Old Tarwater subscribes to an Old Testament narrative of biblical prophecy, and has completely submitted himself to this narrative framework. But at the same time he clearly fears counter-narratives, particularly the scientific one embodied in the article his nephew Rayber writes about him. After reading it, Old Tarwater "felt he was tied hand and foot inside the school-teacher's head, a space as bare and neat as the cell in the asylum, and was shrinking, drying up to fit it" (378). This counter-narrative is so threatening to Old Tarwater that he needs to flee his nephew's house in order to be free from it.

Rayber's experience is the exact opposite of Mason's; he is the one fully developed character in the novel that does resist God's call. He, like Francis, feels drawn toward Mason Tarwater's way of looking at the world, or what he thinks of as the

“irrational and abnormal” embrace of transcendent, overpowering love (401). But, through “what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline,” he has managed to keep the biblical, prophetic narrative for his life at bay (402). He stifles his urges toward “horrible love,” the type of love that is “without reason...love that appeared to exist only to be itself” (401). But this amount of control, this ability to keep his “wise blood” in check, requires that he become frozen by inaction. Because he will not be moved by love, he cannot be moved by anything. He recognizes that what this leaves him with is not “a whole or a full life, [but] he...knew that it was the way his life had to be lived if it were going to have any dignity at all” (402). Rayber consciously embraces “emptiness” because it is the only alternative he can find to the “madness” of falling under the overpowering sway of God’s narrative for his life. Rayber’s paralysis reaches its apotheosis as he sits passively by when Francis murders his beloved son; he cannot and will not act, and is therefore damned “to feel nothing” at all (456).

But while Rayber presents one vision of life that stands in opposition to Mason Tarwater’s prophetic mindset, his is not really the worldview with which the reader comes to identify. Rayber’s stance is thematically important, but in terms of the aesthetics of the novel, O’Connor provides a much more persuasive and reasonable voice to oppose Old Mason Tarwater’s non-rational, God-centered, fundamentalist vision of existence. This voice appears in the first chapter of the novel, counseling Tarwater not to bury his great-uncle because doing so would be to submit himself to Mason’s prophetic narrative for his life. For the most part, this voice counsels Tarwater to resist Mason’s extremism; he informs Tarwater that, “In the rest of the world they do things different

from what you been taught” (345), and because of this seemingly rational reminder, the reader is sympathetic to the voice. Just as Mrs. Flood gave voice to our reasonable objections and questions about Hazel’s actions, this disembodied voice represents our reasonable objections to the path of extremism that Old Tarwater has laid out for Francis:

The way I see it, he [the stranger/ friend] said, you can do one of two things. One of them, not both. Nobody can do things without straining themselves. You can do one thing or you can do the opposite.

Jesus or the devil, the boy said.

No no no, the stranger said, there ain’t no such thing as a devil. I can tell you that from my own self-experience. I know that for a fact. It ain’t Jesus or the devil. It’s Jesus or *you*.

Jesus or me, Tarwater repeated. (354)

This is the fundamental tension of the novel; whether Jesus is real or not is not at issue, the question is whether Tarwater will subscribe to the Jesus narrative or the rationalist one put forward by the stranger/ friend, which emphasizes one’s own personal will. As Lamar Nisly writes, “the reader may be inclined to agree [with the stranger] as well. Rather than the close-minded, hard-headed insistence of old Tarwater, the stranger/ friend’s admonitions seem sensible and calm, providing a contrast to the craziness of the great-uncle” (*Wingless* 56). In this voice, O’Connor once again provides us with a readerly stand-in, but unlike our other proxy, Mrs. Flood, this rationalist voice is not ultimately transformed by the encounter with what the boy represents. Instead, the voice is revealed as the incarnation of the devil.

In the final movement of the novel, the voice becomes embodied. As he prepares to murder Bishop, Tarwater begins to apprehend the physical form of the voice: “The boy looked up into his friend’s eyes, bent upon him, and was startled to see that in the

peculiar darkness, they were violet-colored, very close and intense, and fixed on him with a peculiar look of hunger and attraction” (*Works* 461). Soon thereafter, Tarwater accepts a ride from a “pale, lean, old-looking young man,” who has lavender colored eyes and wears a panama hat³⁰ (469); this man then drugs and rapes Tarwater. O’Connor solidifies the connection between the voice of Tarwater’s “friend” and the rapist by writing that when Tarwater wakes after the assault he finds that his hands are “tied with a lavender handkerchief which his *friend* had thought of as exchange for the hat” (472, emphasis added). It is only at this moment in the novel, after the boy has been violated by the stranger/ friend, that Tarwater rejects the rationalist line of thinking that this character has been advocating throughout the novel and instead finally accepts his prophetic calling. In terms of the reader-text dynamic, the revelation that the voice is the voice of the devil is the most unsettling thing about the novel, because it indicates that either our sensibilities are in line with those of the devil in a way we do not recognize, or that O’Connor thinks that rational thought is of the devil. Either outcome is markedly disturbing.

But the revelation that the rational-seeming voice is actually demonic is just one of many assaults on our sensibilities. The rape itself, which, along with Tarwater’s murder of Bishop, is one of the two most dramatic moments of violence in the text, is another place where O’Connor challenges her readers. Within the logic of the novel, it is a necessary part of Francis’s movement toward accepting his prophetic role. Before he is raped, Francis still intends to resist the prophetic call, stating, “It’s only me. I take care of

³⁰ Early in the novel, when the voice of the stranger first becomes identified as “friendly,” Tarwater pictures the speaker’s face as “sharp and friendly and wise, shadowed under a stiff broad-brimmed panama hat that obscured the color of his eyes” (*Works* 352).

myself. Nobody tells me what to do” (469). After the rape, he hears the voice of his “friend” again, telling him to go claim his land, “Go down and take it...It’s ours. We’ve won it. Ever since you first begun to dig the grave, I’ve stood by you, never left your side, and now we can take it over together, just you and me. You’re not ever going to be alone again” (475). Because he has experienced the violation that this voice is capable of, Francis resists this call towards isolation, and instead ultimately turns back towards the city to begin his prophetic work. If it had not been for the rape, it seems evident that he would have accepted his “friend’s” invitation to live a life of isolation, and, perhaps, normalcy. Since the form of the novel indicates that it is right and good for Tarwater to reject the devil and become a prophet, and we see that he would have been unable or unwilling to do this unless he was violated by the stranger/ friend first, we need to, on some level, view the rape as a positive thing in Tarwater’s development, or at least as a necessary one. But I contend that any line of reasoning that leads to such a conclusion is fundamentally, and morally, flawed. The tightly controlled plot reflects a view of the world in which everything is ordered, where there is a clearly discernible pattern and plan, but any plan or order that includes the necessity of Tarwater’s violation is terrifying to a rationalist sensibility. Perhaps this is O’Connor’s point; she, like Romano Guardini, wants her audience to see that we are in God’s world, but there seems to be little reason to want to accept such a world.

Ralph Wood argues that the rape scene reveals the true nature of the demonic, and that Tarwater’s response is emblematic of grace-enabled freedom, not Jansenist coercion (242-44). John Sykes concurs, writing, “What may seem a compulsion is, when viewed

within O'Connor's theological framework, a liberation from the false would-be autonomy that leads him [Tarwater] to embrace an evil that is nothing" (63). This analysis is, I believe, precisely the sort of reading that O'Connor desired for her work, and the entire novel has been structured towards just such an explication. Early on in the novel she prepares the reader for this eventual outcome, when Mason warns Tarwater, "You are the kind of boy...that the devil is always going to be offering to assist, to give you a smoke or a drink or a ride, and to ask you your bidnis'" (*Works* 367). This is exactly what eventually comes to pass. Just as Mason had "been burned clean and burned clean again...by fire" before he fully understood and accepted his prophetic role (332), Francis, too, suffers violence that prepares him to submit to his own role as prophet. O'Connor connects Mason's fiery call to Tarwater's own; after the rape, Tarwater sets fire to the woods where the violation took place, and afterward his "scorched eyes...looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (473). While we might wish to interpret the ending scene in a way that disallows for the presence of the transcendent sphere in what has taken place (perhaps by reading it in a psychoanalytic way, for instance), to do so is to actively read against the grain of O'Connor's carefully structured plot. Despite our inclinations to see it as deeply disturbing that this young boy, cut off from all family and friends, the victim of a brutal sexual assault, is doing the right thing in embracing his prophetic call, this is exactly what O'Connor wants us to do.³¹ She wants it to be disturbing and

³¹ In letters to friends, scholars, and critics O'Connor repeatedly defends this understanding of the story, as in this letter to the literary critic and novelist John Hawkes, "the boy [Tarwater] doesn't just get himself

unsettling, and she wants us to submit to this dark and disturbing vision just as Francis submits to Mason's (dark and disturbing) narrative of life. By drawing these "large and startling figures" O'Connor is fulfilling her prophetic role, and we are the "children of God" who are being warned of the "terrible speed of mercy" (478). The novel models the theme; reading O'Connor "correctly" is an act of submission, just as, for O'Connor, doing the will of God is an act of submission.

The structure of the novel shows that Tarwater ultimately submits to his great-uncle's vision of life, not because he finds it to be the most intellectually or morally persuasive, but because he finds it impossible to do otherwise. Even before he is raped by the stranger, he is unable to *not* baptize Bishop even as he kills him because this is what Mason's narrative compels him to do. Tarwater is not in control of his own actions, and the assault by the devil incarnate is merely the final push that allows Tarwater to dismiss what is, in O'Connor's view, the selfish and empty narrative that the devil is offering. It is this aspect of the novel that makes it, in my reading, a far less persuasive text; the extremity of O'Connor's vision leaves the reader with little interpretive freedom. The process of refiguration, or the incorporation of the novel's insights into one's own life, is restricted. There can be no accommodation between rationalism and prophecy here; the rationalist line of thought, represented by Rayber and the devil, is vilified and rejected, replaced by Mason and Francis's God-centered extremism. Within the novel, there is no fusion of worldviews, and the one cannot lead into the other; it is hard, if not impossible, to see how the reader who sympathizes with Rayber and the early incarnation of the voice

saved by the skin of his teeth, he in the end prepares to be a prophet himself and to accept what prophets can expect from their earthly lives (the worst)" (*Habit* 350).

will ever come to accept the views of Tarwater. If the central choice really is “Jesus or you,” there seems to be little positive reason to *choose* Jesus. The characters in the novel that do end up on the side of Jesus do so because they are compelled to by “the evils that befall prophets,” particularly “those that come from the Lord and burn the prophet clean” (332). There is no rational reason offered, just a vision of the awful power of God.

While *Wise Blood* culminates in Hazel’s deeply unsettling, and ultimately ambiguous, self-mortification, the form and content of *The Violent Bear it Away* are much more definitive. The novel models a path of submission, and demonstrates quite clearly that, for O’Connor, being a prophet involves complete surrender of one’s own volition to God’s authority. Like many modernists, O’Connor critiques the modern world. Unlike most modernists she does not replace the fractures of modernity with a celebration of the solitary hero who is able to fashion a subjectively meaningful life out of the wasteland of modernity (or who will die trying). Instead, the protagonist of her final novel ultimately submits to authority, and does as he is compelled to do. By the end of *The Violent Bear It Away*, Francis has, quite clearly, relinquished any claims on his own will in the face of the power, and wrath, of God.³²

Reading O’Connor can be a transformative experience, but for those hostile to a Christian worldview these types of stories become grotesqueries, and even for Christian believers the model of submission to divine will/ force can be shocking. But this seems to be exactly what she desires – to force us out of an easy accommodation to faith that

³² Although O’Connor is careful to attribute Francis’s violation to the action of the devil, not to God, the entire form and structure of the novel indicates that this purgation is at least divinely sanctioned, if not carried out.

requires nothing. Unfortunately, the violence inherent in her vision is, at times, too alienating. Her use of violence is effective at indicating the presence of a transcendent sphere, but it does little to make us want to encounter it.

The Catholic authors who come after O'Connor write from within her shadow. They, too, use violence to point towards the possibility of the existence of a transcendent reality, and sometimes they use violence to shock their readers, just as O'Connor professes to do. But in the most effective contemporary Catholic literature, the writers rely less on the extreme, prophetic, violence that is on display in *The Violent Bear It Away*, and instead incorporate the mysterious, unexplained violence, the violence of witness that points the reader toward the irresolvable mystery of life, which is O'Connor's most persuasive legacy to the field of Catholic literature.

CHAPTER THREE

FOLLOWING FLANNERY:

VIOLENCE IN THE FICTION OF WALKER PERCY AND TIM GAUTREAUX

Flannery O'Connor's reputation, and influence, as the single most important American Catholic writer of the twentieth century casts a long shadow, which every American writer who self-identifies as a "Catholic writer" needs to confront. In this chapter, I will be examining what the American Catholic novel looks like after Flannery O'Connor, and how the writers who follow in her wake negotiate her most visible and characteristic rhetorical tool – her use of violence. One might think, given the prominence of violence in O'Connor's work, that other American Catholic writers would refrain from using it, so as to not be labeled mere followers or imitators, but this is not the case. Although violence is not indispensable for any of these subsequent writers, as it was for O'Connor, it still occupies a prominent place in the work of nearly every contemporary American Catholic writer, and these writers continue to utilize it, as O'Connor did, to bring both characters and readers into contact with a Catholic understanding of existence.

But this is not to say that they simply follow O'Connor's model. If O'Connor used violence in order to make her work fresh, to shock her audience into reconsidering their assumptions about existence, an audience trained on O'Connor's fiction will no longer be shocked by violence in the same way. Therefore, contemporary Catholic

writers who use violence in their work need to continually make it new, so that it can still have an effect on their readers. This does not necessarily mean making the violence more extreme,¹ but rather it means rethinking the presentation of, and the meaning behind, moments of violence. In the fictions that I will consider in the following chapters, violence is repeatedly linked to moments of grace, or insight, but the direct correlation between these two elements that one finds in O'Connor's work is not often present.

We can see O'Connor's legacy of violence being negotiated in the work of the two writers who we might consider as O'Connor's most direct heirs: Walker Percy and Tim Gautreaux. There is a long critical tradition of studying Percy and O'Connor together; they are the two most prominent American Catholic fiction writers, products of a similar time and place who even studied the craft of fiction under the same mentor, Caroline Gordon.² Tim Gautreaux does not share their critical stature, but for a variety of reasons positioning his work alongside theirs is an enlightening project.³ Gautreaux, too, is a Southern Catholic writer, and, like O'Connor, he is a master of the short story. Born in 1947, he is of a different generation from O'Connor and Percy, but his work consciously deals with similar themes, and he has repeatedly acknowledged his debt to

¹ Although some do just this. See, for instance, John L'Heureux's *The Shrine at Altamira* (1992), which culminates in a moment of double self-immolation.

² A non-exhaustive list of critics who have written on both authors (either in the same work, or in subsequent studies) includes: Robert Brinkmeyer, Gary Ciuba, John Desmond, Paul Elie, Jan Nordby Gretlund, Peter Hawkins, Marion Montgomery, Lamar Nisly, Farrell O'Gorman, John Sykes, and Karl-Heinz Westarp.

³ The only critic to study the three authors together is L. Lamar Nisly, whose excellent study *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics, and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Constructions of Audience and Tone in O'Connor, Gautreaux, and Percy* (2011), explores the different imagined audiences for these three authors, and the ways their differing regional experiences of Catholicism influenced their work. While I do not agree with all of Nisly's premises, or conclusions, I am indebted to his readings of Gautreaux's work in particular.

both writers, even going so far as incorporating two of O'Connor's own characters – Julian from “Everything That Rises Must Converge” and O.E. Parker from “Parker’s Back” – into his story “Idols” (published 6/22/09 in *The New Yorker*). He can also be placed in the same direct literary lineage as both writers, since Gautreaux studied fiction under Walker Percy at Loyola University New Orleans, in 1977. Before taking this course, Gautreaux thought of himself as a poet, and he has said that it was his experience with Percy that helped put him on the path to writing fiction (*Conversations* 41).

My goal in this chapter is not simply to list similarities and differences between these authors, or to provide an influence study, but to lay out a narrative of how Catholic writers reimagine the role and function of violence in contemporary literature and society over time. For O'Connor, violence was a tool used to identify and make visible the role of the transcendent in a secular age. The violence in her fiction may arise from social dynamics, as explained in my discussion of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” in Chapter 2, but her primary aim is spiritual, not social, critique, and for O'Connor, while social and cultural dynamics play a role in a character's spiritual state, it is the spiritual outcome, more than the social one, that matters most. This prioritizing of individual insight and salvation over cultural and social reformation has been criticized as being insufficiently engaged with the problems of the age. Although they do not mention O'Connor by name,⁴ Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, in their article, “Do You Believe in Magic? Literary Thinking After the New Left” (2005), excoriate the American writers of the mid-

⁴ Indeed, they do not focus on any avowedly religious writers, but rather writers who draw on religious or spiritual tropes mostly devoid of dogma.

twentieth century who fail to grapple with social issues and instead take refuge in individualized epiphanies and moments of mysticism. McCann and Szalay contend that, in the literature of the 1960s, “complaints against science and rationality became increasingly common, and invocations of the irrational and mysterious took on newfound meaning” (438), and they lament that this embrace of mystery, ritual and “magic” led a generation of thinkers, writers, and activists to focus, almost solipsistically, on the individual at the expense of the social and political implications of this decision. As they explain in a 2009 response to a critique of their work by John McClure, the novels that they criticize all “offer...not a vision of political life but of spiritual communion – and indeed of refuge from a political realm viewed as overwhelmingly cruel and unjust...However moving and beautiful such a vision may be, in our view it offers a highly limited understanding of political action and no model for contesting the genuine injustice that has characterized our recent history” (*boundary 2*, 152).

Using their analysis, one could certainly find fault with the social and political implications of O’Connor’s work,⁵ but for the Catholic writers who come after O’Connor, McCann and Szalay’s critique is less valid. In the post-Vatican II world, the emphasis on personal salvation – the individual’s journey towards salvation or damnation – is recontextualized into a communal setting. One’s salvation or damnation has everything to do with one’s relationships, not only with a transcendent God, but with the

⁵ This is not to say that O’Connor’s work lacks a political or cultural dimension (see Bacon’s work for the most extensive social reading of her work); rather, my point is that in O’Connor’s work the state of the individual’s soul is of primary importance. After all, there is little chance for lasting political or social change within most of her works, since so many of her stories end with a death.

people of God on earth. In J.C. Whitehouse's phraseology, the Church's emphasis shifted from a vertical to a horizontal approach to God, and post-Vatican II Catholic fiction reflects this shift. Consequently, the violence in post-conciliar fiction takes on a different valence; instead of primarily serving as a means of breaking through the secular wall between the human and the divine, it [often] breaks through the wall that separates individuals, or, conversely, the violence serves as an obstacle that prevents the union of individuals that is a precursor to grace.

We can begin to see this change in the fiction of Walker Percy, whose fictional oeuvre begins almost immediately before the opening Vatican II in 1962, with *The Moviegoer* (1961), and ends in the post-aggiornamento world of 1987, with the publication of *The Thanatos Syndrome*. While the primary focus of Percy's work is always on an individual who is alienated from himself (all of Percy's protagonists are male) and his society, and who must often-times come to reject his society in order to reclaim his sense of self, Percy's depiction of this process of alienation and recovery is united with an increasingly overt social consciousness. Throughout his work, Percy strikes a balance between emphasis on the individual and emphasis on community, until the two become practically inseparable, and the sickness of the one is indicative of the sickness for the other, and the cure of the one hints at the possible cure for the other as well.

In the work of Tim Gautreaux, whose entire fictional corpus is post-Vatican II, we find the scale beginning to be tipped in the other direction. Although his focus is still on the individual (Gautreaux is often commended for his strong characterization),

Gautreaux's work does not primarily concern itself with the individual's pursuit of salvation, but rather with the interactions between the individual and his community – how a person is shaped by the culture in which he lives, and how he in turn can reshape his community with his choices. Nevertheless, his work is still deeply Catholic, since the broad themes of his novels are profoundly shaped by Catholic social teaching, particularly the Church's stance on war and violence. It would be hard to indict Gautreaux's work for being, in McCann and Szalay's terms, insufficiently engaged with the social world. In his work, we can see the fruits of the Vatican II 'turn towards the world,' – his fiction is emblematic of the American Catholic Church's post-Vatican II position vis-à-vis the modern world, which Jay Dolan describes as "an era when issues of social justice became paramount" (*Search* 201).

Gautreaux's stories feature moments of violence that are, on the surface, very O'Connor-like, yet they have a different underlying significance. Ultimately, Gautreaux's work, drawing on Post-Vatican II Catholic social teaching, critiques violence as both a social, and literary, tool. In particular, the structure of *The Missing* (2009), his most recent novel, creates a dynamic in which the reader expects, and even desires, a violent climax, but instead of fulfilling this desire it leaves us questioning both why we desire to see violence carried out and why the violence that is present is not necessarily transformative or redemptive. While in O'Connor's work, violence is almost always an opportunity for grace, Gautreaux's fiction seems to operate on an inverse principal, where the withholding of violence becomes a moment of sanctification. At the same time, I contend that while Gautreaux's fiction portrays a more palatable understanding of

violence, it lacks much of the truly transformative properties that are found in O'Connor's work. In Gautreaux's fiction the fundamental questions about the meaning of life and humanity's proper relationship to God are elided in favor of more practical questions; for Gautreaux, the fundamental question is not 'Why are we here?' but 'How should I live?'

It is in this juxtaposition of Gautreaux's more socially conscious fiction and O'Connor's metaphysical concerns that I position Percy's work, because it occupies a middle ground between these two poles. Repeatedly, in both his nonfiction and his fiction, Percy stakes out a position that unites the metaphysical and social/ cultural realms, and his treatment, and understanding, of violence is a crucial factor in bringing these realms into contact.

Walker Percy as Liminal Catholic

Kieran Quinlan, in *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* (1996), argues that Walker Percy marks the end of an era, because no Catholic writer after Percy could ever be as "immersed in the technicalities of a philosophical and theological Catholicism" that shaped the pre-conciliar Catholic Church, and he contends that a Catholic worldview such as Percy's "is no longer viable" in the postmodern world (9). Quinlan is correct that the Catholic writers who come after Percy are almost certainly not shaped by the same theologians or philosophers, and that Catholics who came of age in the Post-Vatican II Catholic Church have, in a sense, a very different experience of what it means to be Catholic, particularly in terms of Catholicism's stance towards the modern world. But this is not to say that post-Vatican II Catholic fiction does not exist, only that it exists in a

different fashion, and both its form and content contain elements that differentiate it from pre-Vatican II fiction. Rather than position Percy as the last of the old guard, though, I prefer to see him, like many of his characters, as occupying a liminal space between different worlds and different ways of understanding oneself. He, like O'Connor, Greene, and Waugh, is focused on an individual character's salvation, but unlike these earlier writers, Percy's vision of salvation is not primarily individualistic.⁶ Percy's characters are alienated searchers after meaning, but they fail to find ultimate meaning in the direct relation between themselves and God. Rather, what insight they come to is relational; they are not, and cannot be, redeemed in isolation.

Quinlan is right that Percy's theology was shaped by the neo-Thomism that was so influential in the first half of the twentieth century and that he had little use for the more progressive, or radical, theology of his mature years. In an interview, Percy named Romano Guardini, Jacques Maritain, and Karl Rahner as the "recent theologians who've meant the most to me," and he called Hans Küng and Edward Schillebeeckx "nutty, heterodox priests...who I'm not sure are Christians" (*More Conversations* 117-18). But while he is the last exemplar of a certain type of Catholic novelist, formed by pre-Vatican II theologians and philosophers, he is also the first American Catholic writer that we can

⁶ In Greene's novels, one character's salvation (or damnation) radiates outwards to touch on the lives of those around him or her - think particularly of Sarah's conversion and its impact on Bendrix, in *The End of the Affair*, or the Whiskey Priest's death and its subsequent effect on the child who rejects the lieutenant and his weapon at the end of *The Power and the Glory*. In both instances, one individual's sanctity does become connected to that of the whole community, which is a manifestation of the Catholic concept of the communion of saints, but in both of these instances the primary focus of the novel is still on the protagonist's journey towards salvation.

consider as being engaged with postmodernist concerns.⁷ Percy's theology is not postmodern, but his fictional interests share a great deal with his contemporary postmodern writers, including the anxiety over the ability of language to convey meaning, as well as interest in, and concern over, the proliferation of media and its effect on consciousness. Postmodernism is notoriously difficult to categorize, but its generally agreed upon traits include "fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust of all universal or 'totalizing' discourses," along with the rejection of "belief in linear progress, absolute truths, the rational planning of ideal social orders, and the standardization of knowledge and production" (Harvey 9). Terry Eagleton writes that postmodernism signals "the death of... 'metanarratives,'" and he declares that in the postmodern world, "science and philosophy must jettison their grandiose metaphysical claims and view themselves more modestly as just another set of narratives" (194).

While it may seem paradoxical to declare a writer a postmodern Catholic, since Catholicism is clearly a 'metanarrative' and postmodernism rejects all such claims to universal truth,⁸ Percy's work investigates this very paradox, most notably in *Lancelot*, as I will discuss below. And Percy, while not embracing Derridean deconstruction, was deeply interested in the 'linguistic turn' in literary studies; his study of linguistics, which appears in both his non-fiction and fiction (particularly *The Second Coming*), engages

⁷ I would argue that Muriel Spark is the first Catholic writer who can rightly be discussed as a postmodernist, since *The Comforters* (1957), which deals with postmodern questions of authenticity and representation, predates *The Moviegoer* (1961).

⁸ It is important to note that postmodernism does not preclude the possibility of universal truth; rather, it precludes the possibility that an individual can claim to definitively know such a truth, or to impose such a truth claim on another person.

with poststructuralism on its own terms. Percy's fiction, like many a postmodern novel, presents a world in which things are falling apart and where the center has failed to hold, but rather than trying to revert to an idealized past, or gathering together the remnants of a defunct culture,⁹ it acknowledges that the past is irretrievably lost, and that we must, as a society, search for something new, while resisting top-down solutions that are overtly dogmatic or proscriptive.

This last element is yet one more example of Percy's contradictions. Percy's fiction, as I will show, provides hints that Catholicism offers some solution to the problems of contemporary society, but what Percy champions in Catholicism is not its hierarchical structure and institutions, but rather its sacramentality and the way it provides communion between isolated individuals. Even as he points towards these Catholic elements, though, his work resists the urge to didacticism; his characters are searching for these things, and even when they find them, Percy takes care to not overemphasize the religious aspects of either the seeking or the finding. This is somewhat surprising since Percy, at least early in his career, had a very definitive view of the goals for his fiction. In an early letter to his mentor Caroline Gordon,¹⁰ he stated, "What I really want to do is tell people *what they must do and what they must believe if they want to live,*" and he went on to tell her he thought his next novel would "be mainly given to ass-

⁹ Percy's work, in its depiction of a world where things have fallen apart, clearly shares many thematic concerns with the modernists as well, but unlike the many modernists who turned toward the past for answers, such as Yeats and his turn towards Celtic history or Eliot and his "fragments...shored against my ruins", Percy rejects such a nostalgic move.

¹⁰ Dated April 6, 1962.

kicking for Jesus' sake" (quoted in Tolson 300-301, italics in original). Part of this claim can be attributed to his zeal as a relatively recent convert to Catholicism, and in his later years he would back away from making such strongly authoritarian assertions regarding his fiction, but throughout his career he maintained a strong sense both for what was wrong with the modern world and how these problems could be overcome.¹¹ Even as he went about drafting his 'ass-kicking' novels, though, he refrained from allowing their religious message to overwhelm the narrative. Percy's novels enact what John Sykes, using Kierkegaard's terminology, describes as "indirect communication," in which the writer "attempts to lead the reader to the verge of a discovery that the reader may or may not make. The discovery is one the writer has already made, and in that sense the writer has led the reader directly to it. But in a deeper sense, the revelation by its very nature is private and invokes the agency of the reader" (114). While it is possible to perform strong authoritarian readings of his work, their form resists such classification. They remain open-ended and ambiguous, thereby allowing, perhaps demanding, that the reader make the final judgment calls regarding what has happened within the framework of the novel.

There is one sense, though, in which Percy's novels are unambiguous.

Throughout his fictional oeuvre, he remains consistent in his attempt to diagnose what is wrong with the modern world, and this is where Percy's use of fictional violence provides an important access point to his thematic concerns. Violence pervades Percy's

¹¹ Percy's nonfiction provides more overt examples of these tendencies, but while he may explain both his critique of society and his understanding of possible solutions more clearly in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975) and *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983) than in his novels, both his fiction and his nonfiction manifest the same worldview. The primary difference is that in his fiction, Percy is interested in depicting the problem and possible solutions, not explaining them.

novels, and it comes in two broad categories: the largely impersonal violence that is a product of widespread social and cultural ills, which in turn can be attributed to the ascendancy of the metanarratives of science and dehumanized ‘progress,’ and the intensely personal, self-directed suicidal violence that is a product of an individual’s feelings of meaninglessness (Lancelot Lamar’s homicidal violence, in *Lancelot*, is a different manifestation of these same two root causes). Both of these types of violence relate to Percy’s critique of contemporary society. Percy explained his vision of modern America in a number of places, and it changes little over the course of his career. In 1978, he wrote:

The American novelists seems to be saying...that something has gone badly wrong with Americans and with American life, indeed modern life, and that people are suffering from a deep dislocation in their lives, alienation from themselves, dehumanization, and so on – and I’m not talking about poverty, racial discrimination, and women’s rights. I’m talking about the malaise which seems to overtake the very people who seem to have escaped these material and social evils – the successful middle class. What engages the novelist’s attention is not the Snopeses or the denizens of Tobacco Road or Flannery O’Connor’s half-mad backwoods preachers or a black underclass. It is rather the very people who have overcome these particular predicaments and find themselves living happily ever after in their comfortable exurban houses and condominiums. Or is it happily ever after? Either the novelists are all crazy or something has gone badly wrong here, something which has nothing to do with poverty or blackness or whiteness.

(*Signposts* 36)

Percy’s critique of the modern age was shaped by a variety of influences, including his reading of such existentialist thinkers as Kierkegaard, Sartre, Camus, and Dostoevsky,¹² but his worldview was also shaped by the Catholic intellectual tradition. In particular, I want to focus on the influence of Romano Guardini, who, as discussed in

¹² See Luschei Chapter 2: “Some Light from the Existentialists,” and Desmond’s Introduction to *Walker Percy’s Search for Community* for a thorough examination of Percy’s influences.

Chapter Two, was also a profound influence on O'Connor's worldview, because there is an important distinction to be made between the way Guardini's work affected both authors, and this distinction will help to clarify my reading of Percy as both a traditional and a new kind of Catholic author. As we have seen, O'Connor most frequently praised Guardini's *The Lord*, and this work is primarily about the individual's relationship with the person of Jesus Christ; it is an example of kerygmatic theology, a way of understanding God that is based not primarily on doctrine but on a personal relationship "with the living Christ who is present to people of every age" (Krieg 138). It makes sense that this work resonated with O'Connor, whose own fiction emphasizes the individualized relationship between human and the divine. Percy, though, used a passage from Guardini's *The End of the Modern World* as the epigraph to his second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, and when Percy writes or speaks about Guardini, he seems to be referring to this work, or at least to the worldview that Guardini displays within it. In a 1984 interview, when questioned about the existential nature of his fiction, Percy steers the conversation to Guardini's worldview, which might be termed a form of Christian existentialism:

He [Guardini] is talking about an existential predicament. He says we are living in a post-Christian world where people are alone but he also says, and this is an important thing, it's the world where there is less deception; people are alone and, yet, they are capable of forming true relationships. One lonely person finds another lonely person. From this very loneliness, this existential alienation, there is possible a true communion, which in a way is even better than it used to be, when everybody lived in the same system, everybody understood one another, say, in the nineteenth century Europe. (*More Conversations* 74)

This description of alienation, loneliness and possible connection comes directly from *The End of the Modern World*, which in both tone and format is a very different work from *The Lord*. While Guardini's essential worldview remains consistent throughout, the two works serve distinct functions. *The End of the Modern World* is an assessment of the state of society, not of an individual's relationship to Christ. That Percy was drawn to this work of social commentary says a great deal about his fictional project, which is in large part a critique not of the individual but of modernity as a whole, and the way the problems of modernity affect the individual's sense of self. Percy's understanding of the modern age as being defined by the loss of common consensus, loss of faith, and the pursuit of pleasure as the highest good all have analogues in Guardini's assessment of the modern world.

There are a number of places in *The End of the Modern World* where Guardini's words closely parallel Percy's own and will help to illuminate Percy's fiction. Guardini writes that "the experience of modern man" entails "man's loss of his objective sense of belonging to existence" and that this results in "modern anxiety," which "arises from man's deep-seated consciousness that he lacks either a 'real' or a symbolic place in reality. In spite of his actual position on earth he is a being without security. The very needs of man's senses are left unsatisfied, since he has ceased to experience a world which guarantees him a place in the total scheme of existence" (34-35). This depiction of the anxious, displaced individual is characteristic of all of Percy's protagonists, whose fictional journeys entail the search for both a "'real' and symbolic place" in their worlds. Guardini contends that most anxious, alienated moderns end up as examples of what he

terms, “mass man,” which he defines as an individual who “has no desire for independence or originality in either the management or conduct of his life. ...To either a greater or a lesser degree mass man is convinced that his conformity is both reasonable and right” (60). Most of Percy’s protagonists are “mass men”; Binx Bolling, for instance, describes himself at the beginning of *The Moviegoer* as “a model tenant and a model citizen and [I] take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me” (6). One can read Percy’s novels as being primarily about “mass men” who are awoken to self-consciousness, usually through an act of violence, and who subsequently come to reject conformity but struggle to find an adequate replacement.

For Guardini, as both *The Lord* and *The End of the Modern World* show, the only adequate and sufficient source of meaning in the contemporary age is grounded in a total reliance on God. Guardini sees a renewed form of Christianity as the solution to the problems of the new age, but in his view this new Christianity will be distinct from contemporary Christianity, for while it is contiguous with the traditions of Christianity, it will “once again need to prove itself deliberately as a faith which is not self-evident; it will be forced to distinguish itself more sharply from a dominant non-Christian ethos...At the forefront of Christian life, man’s obedience to God will assert itself with a new power” (106-07). Man’s faith and obedience to God will ground him and “permit him to remain a vital person within the mounting loneliness of the future, a loneliness experienced in the very midst of the masses and all their organizations” (108). Percy is particularly adept at depicting this loneliness, but while his novels do usually show his protagonists finding a way beyond this loneliness, they do not have the same surety of

religious vision that Guardini demonstrates. Percy's novels usually end with some instantiation of faith, but it is tenuous at best, and lacks the assertiveness that Guardini indicates is necessary to combat the modern malaise.

The End of the Modern World concludes with a vision of a smaller, more committed Christian society, where love is revitalized, primarily because this love is grounded in a personal devotion, and obedience, to God. Percy uses a selection from this conclusion as an epigraph to *The Last Gentleman*:

... We know that the modern world is coming to an end... at the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation that he denies... Loneliness in faith will be terrible. Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will that love be which flows from one lonely person to another... the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean.

This epigraph is a collage of passages culled from *The End of the Modern World*, ranging over more than 50 pages of text.¹³ What Percy chooses to include here, and what he leaves out, are informative. Percy selects passages that emphasize the sense of an ending and the existential loneliness that this entails, along with a corrective to this loneliness found via the love "which flows from one lonely person to another" ushering in a new, "open and clean" world; these selections encapsulate Percy's thematic concerns, while at the same time eliding one of, if not *the*, central theme of Guardini's work: the coming importance of man's "unconditional obedience to God" (107), which makes the love between individuals of faith possible. Guardini's original sentence reads, "Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will that

¹³ The selections are, in order, from pages 50, 101, 108-09, and 105.

love be which flows from one lonely person to another involving a courage of the heart born from the immediacy of the love of God as it was made known in Christ,” and this is but one of many passages where Guardini foregrounds the inextractibility of God and Christ from the only hope he sees for the future. Percy, though, hints at a different solution, one that includes the possibility, but not the necessity, of faith. Percy’s fiction, like Guardini’s work, emphasizes what has gone wrong with the modern world, but Percy points toward relationships, rather than the total surrender of one’s will to God, as the primary solution to these problems.

This dynamic is most evident in the conclusions of his novels, where Percy repeatedly demonstrates an uneasy accommodation between faith and doubt; within his fiction there is no such thing as absolute certainty. Faith is clearly important for Percy, and for his characters, but it is primarily relational. John Desmond, in *Walker Percy’s Search for Community*, persuasively makes the case that “all of Percy’s fictions show a movement toward some genuine community as the novel ends, even if only between two people, a *solitude a deux*, which is for Percy the bedrock of all human community” (4). Desmond goes on to explain that for Percy, community is an ontological necessity because “we are structured to fulfill our natures not individualistically, but through relationships, through community” (17), and that all true communities are an imitation of the mystical communion embodied in the Trinity. Many of Percy’s novels end with moments of community, or shared love between lonely individuals, and it is possible to

view this community as an instantiation of a sacramental communion,¹⁴ but this connection is never fully explained. While Percy's novels do point to community and communion as solutions to the problems of modernity, we never see his protagonists surrendering their will in obedience to God.

Percy's resistance to Guardini's position on unconditional obedience to God might strike us as surprising, since he repeatedly cited Guardini's worldview as an influence on his own writing,¹⁵ but I see it as perfectly in keeping with Percy's postmodern fictional concerns. While Flannery O'Connor saw man's inflated sense of self to be a central problem of modernity, for Percy, the problem was not that man put too much faith in himself, but rather that he was too willing to surrender his own autonomy to systems of belief that he spent little to no time interrogating.¹⁶ In particular, Percy was critical of what he saw as the modern tendency to believe that science could explain everything, and while this 'scientism' was his primary target, Percy's work is critical of all unreasoned, fundamentalist beliefs, or what Eagleton calls 'meta-narratives.' Percy's novels are about the search for meaning and understanding, and fundamentalist beliefs

¹⁴ For more on the connection between Percy's understanding of community and sacramentality, see the introduction to Desmond's study. Desmond writes, "Percy's vision of community was complex and multifaceted. At its root is a theological conception of community, of a mystical community of spiritual beings existing both within and beyond time, under God. ... Belief in the divine Word made flesh, for Percy, is the central truth of community" (5).

¹⁵ For instances in which Percy cites Guardini's influence, see *More Conversations with Walker Percy* pages 74 and 118-118 and *Signposts in a Strange Land* page 208.

¹⁶ Lancelot Lamar is an exception to this; he is a Percy protagonist who certainly has too much faith in his own intellect and abilities, although he, too, finally surrenders his autonomy, perhaps unwittingly, to unexamined narratives, as discussed below.

(including religious ones¹⁷) preclude any such searching. In a very real sense, this is why his novels rarely have clear, well-defined resolutions; such a resolution would negate the necessity of a search.

To be clear, though, Percy found “scientism” to be the most widespread, and unacknowledged, fundamentalism in contemporary America. Scientism, he explained, “is characterized less by the practice of a method of discovery and knowing than by what can only be called a surrender of sovereignty and a willingness to believe almost as a matter of course that the scientific method by virtue of its spectacular triumphs and the near magic of its technology can be extrapolated to a quasi-religious all-construing worldview” (*Signposts* 297). Percy contends that the individual who believes science can answer all questions and solve all mysteries is a sort of fundamentalist, one who believes without questioning the premises or results of one’s belief. Within the world of his fiction, the end result of this blind faith is the malaise which results when a person surrenders one’s sovereignty over oneself and eliminates the possibility for mystery.

One object of Percy’s fiction, then, is to demonstrate the flaws in the faith of scientism, and one way he does this is by showing the violent outcomes of this belief – most memorably in the “Fedville” complex that appears in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, which includes “the Behavioral Institute, the Geriatrics Center, and the Love Clinic” (*Ruins* 14). In these centers, individuals who are unhappy are subjected

¹⁷ While Percy’s novels do usually include a priest or a nun whose actions are held up as exemplary, these individuals are always marginalized figures within the Catholic Church. Val Vaught is working alone in an isolated and forgotten school in *The Last Gentleman*; Fr. Smith locks himself up in a fire-tower where no one can reach him in *The Thanatos Syndrome*; Percival is not even an active priest for most of *Lancelot*. They are hardly representative of the hierarchical aspects of Catholicism.

to behavioral conditioning in order to recondition them to be exactly like other, “normal,” individuals. These clinics are places where individual human lives have no inherent meaning, because the focus of scientific thinking is not about the individual but about the group. Both *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* portray the clinics as totalitarian machines, willing to dispose of those individuals who will not conform. This is particularly apparent in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, where ped euthanasia and ger euthanasia have been legally sanctioned by the Supreme Court, and pharmacology is the new widespread means of controlling human behavior, leading to decidedly subhuman results.

One of the central set pieces of *Love in the Ruins* illustrates Percy’s condemnation of scientism. Tom More and the behaviorists of Fedville hold a debate about whether or not to euthanize Mr. Ives, an elderly man who refuses “to participate in the various recreational, educational, creative and group activities” at his geriatric community, the Golden Years Center, and instead “defecate[s] on Flirtation Walk” and “utter[s] gross obscenities to Ohioans” (223), until finally lapsing into a mute, catatonic state. Given his unwillingness to participate, and his resistance to reconditioning via the Skinner box, the Fedville doctors want to send him to the Happy Isle Separation Center, where he would be euthanized. More is able to save the man by demonstrating that his unwillingness to speak or act does not indicate an absence of “selfhood” (228), and that his decision to “refuse to respond at all” to the Skinner box is the only possible response to reconditioning (234). In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy takes his critique of the kind of scientism embodied by Fedville one step further, linking the work of the Fedville

scientists to Nazi Germany. Fr. Smith, Tom More's friend and the conscience of the novel, tells More that he is part of the "first generation of doctors in the history of medicine to turn their backs on the oath of Hippocrates and kill millions of useless old people, unborn children, born malformed children, for the good of mankind" and he warns that, inevitably, "you're going to end up killing Jews" (127-28).

A Pattern Established: Violence as Precursor to Search in *The Moviegoer*

For Percy, scientism leads directly to institutionalized murder because it devalues individual human life; it also contributes to the personal sense of meaninglessness that he calls the modern malaise. This process is evident in his earliest published work, *The Moviegoer*, where Binx explains that in his early days he was an advocate of scientism: "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...The greatest success of this enterprise, which I call my vertical search, came one night when I sat in a hotel room in Birmingham and read a book called *The Chemistry of Life*. When I finished it, it seemed to me that the main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable" (*Moviegoer* 69-70). But at that moment he realizes the limits of this 'vertical' approach to understanding, "The only difficulty was that though the universe was disposed of, I myself was left over" (70). In other words, nothing that he learned could explain himself, or as Percy described the predicament in a 1984 interview, "What people don't realize is that the scientific method has no way of uttering one word about an individual creature. ...science is only interested in you so far as you are like another class

of people. But science itself cannot utter one word about the individual self in so far as it is individual. It leaves a huge left-over” (*More Conversations* 73).

Binx, rather than beginning a new search for an understanding of himself as an individual, turns away from this sort of existential question, and instead “went out and saw a movie called *It Happened One Night*” (70). He turns to the movies because they allow him to elide the question of meaningfulness; they provide him with a model for living that is all surface and no depth. By escaping into the movies, he negates the need to answer the questions that linger below the surface, such as ‘what does it mean to be alive’¹⁸ – for most of his life, before the action of the novel, Binx has been content to ignore this lingering question in favor of a life lived easily on the surface. It is only when he is confronted by the coming death of his brother and his cousin Kate’s suicidal urges that he begins to search, again, for an answer to the question that he did not want to face: “why am I here?”

Part of Binx’s difficulty is that he inhabits a liminal space; falling between various communities and identities, he lacks any place to truly feel connected to the world. Binx dwells in a middle ground between the aristocratic, stoic gentility of his father’s family and the faith-filled, down-to-earth sensibility of his mother’s. He lives in a kind of nowhere, in-between space that he values for its anonymousness and lack of charm (*Moviegoer* 6). And so, like Percy’s Man on a Train, “he is both in the world he is

¹⁸ This is not to say that movies cannot probe existential questions, but Percy is sure to point out that the movies that Binx goes to see substitute empty answers to these questions: “The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place – but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead” (*Moviegoer* 13).

traveling through and not in it...[in a place where] a partition exists...between oneself and one's fellow commuters, a partition which is impenetrable by anything short of disaster" (*Message* 87). And, like Percy's commuter, it is only after disaster strikes that Binx comes to himself and comes to see himself as "a wayfarer and a pilgrim." Percy contends that this is the modern condition: that truly self-aware people are alienated from themselves and their communities, and that modern man is continually searching for ways to reintegrate into the world, to come to feel at home in the world again. But, on some level, this quest to feel at home in world is an impossible one because the metanarratives that lead to a feeling of belonging and groundedness are no longer viable. They have been discredited, and so the self-aware cannot embrace them.

Percy's first novel, then, is a diagnosis not only of Binx Bolling's life, but also of the culture that produces him. Percy's depiction of mid-century American culture (and in particular the Southern culture out of which he is writing) is of a society that is structured such that it prevents the individual from asking the questions that Binx eventually comes to ask, and that it requires some shock to the system, some form of violence, to lead the individual to question this system. Binx is surrounded by a number of individuals who espouse unreflective worldviews, from Aunt Emily's stoicism to Uncle Jules's business-savvy bonhomie to his mother's unreflective faith. While it is tempting, given Percy's stated religious affiliation, to claim his mother's Catholicism as the 'correct' mode of living within the novel, Percy is critical of her faith as well: "sometimes when she mentions God, it strikes me that my mother uses him as but one of the devices that come to hand in an outrageous man's world, to be put to work like all the rest in the one

enterprise she has any use for: the canny management of the shocks of life” (*Moviegoer* 142). Like the movies that Binx frequents, all of these characters represent ready-made answers to the problems of modernity, and Binx’s ‘search’ is about the necessity of circumventing these easy solutions in search of something more difficult to articulate.¹⁹

The malaise that afflicts Binx Bolling, and indeed all of Percy’s protagonists in one form or another, is about a crisis of meaning, something that Charles Taylor expounds upon in *A Secular Age*. Taylor defines the secular age as “one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (19), and he writes that this eclipse of the possibility of transcendence brings about, for some individuals, “a sense of malaise, emptiness, and a need for meaning” (302). Percy’s work focuses almost exclusively on these types of individuals, because he believes that this should be the way that all individuals feel. In Percy’s view, if a person does not feel this way, then he or she is most likely simply not aware of his or her own condition, and part of Percy’s goal as a fiction writer is to initiate this feeling in his readers. His goal, though, is not to point out

¹⁹ Farrell O’Gorman uses Kierkegaard’s terminology to differentiate the modes of belief at work in the novel, including commitment to “a complacent ‘aesthetic’ life devoted to pleasure-seeking – the life of the consumer,” a religious orientation, and “a third possibility: that of the ethical life, the principles of which are derived solely from human reason and tradition rather than divine revelation” (*Peculiar* 177). O’Gorman notes that although this ethical orientation is appealing to Percy, he repeatedly shows it to be ultimately insufficient, “characterized by a secret self-absorption and despair” (177). Alongside these three modes of living, Percy also positions, and critiques, what Amy Hungerford describes as the widespread post-war “faith in faith – a version of religious thinking that minimizes the specificity of religious doctrine in service to usually nationalistic goals of civic connection” (3). Binx is continually fascinated, and mystified, by his countrymen’s professions of faith, particularly evident in the radio program “This I Believe” (*Moviegoer* 94-96), which evince belief without context or substance. For Percy, as for O’Connor, true belief requires specificity, and cost.

the absurdity of life, but rather to push his characters, and his readers, past this feeling. He wants to initiate in them (us) a search for meaning.

For Taylor, one of the defining characteristics of contemporary society is that most people live in a “middle position,” between complete disbelief and real religious conviction – where we “strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practicing a vocation we find fulfilling, and...which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare” (7). It is a place where the highest goal is “human flourishing” and there is no possibility (or desire) for anything more than this. Binx’s is an interesting case, because in many ways he fits this middle position, which Taylor describes as “a way to escape the forms of negation and emptiness, without having reached fullness” (6); this is how Binx envisions himself. His search is for some way beyond the middle ground of “human flourishing” into a more rich and fulfilling life. Of course it is important to note that at the start of the novel he does not have a spouse or a fulfilling job and this might contribute to his discontentment, but that is quite explicitly not how he understands his predicament. He sees himself as a searcher, in Taylor’s sense of the word.

So if the novel is about the process of circumventing the modern malaise, which is itself a by-product of a mode of unreflective living dictated by modern American culture, then it is worth questioning how Binx comes to question, and finally reject, the prepackaged ideological systems of his culture. Significantly, his journey towards insight begins with a moment of violence. Binx says he first became aware of his alienation, or of “the possibility of the search” (13) after being wounded in the war – only after he was knocked unconscious could he come to see things anew – “only once in my life was the

grip of everydayness broken – when I lay bleeding in a ditch” (145). This is one of the recurring themes of *The Moviegoer*, that in the depersonalized modern world we need tragedy and pain, like Kate’s fiancée’s death, or Binx’s car accident, to break through the malaise, the everydayness of life, and begin to look for more out of life than simply being alive. This idea, that an individual will only become aware of his condition when he or she suffers violence, is found throughout Percy’s fiction.²⁰ The same sentiment is uttered in *The Last Gentleman*: “The certain availability of death is the very condition of recovering oneself” (372); *Love in the Ruins*, “One morning...my wrists were cut and bleeding. Seeing the blood, I came to myself, saw myself as itself and the world for what it is, and began to love life” (97); and *The Second Coming*, “Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane? And how is it that death, the nearness of death, can restore a missed life?” (124).

Percy makes this claim in a number of his non-fiction pieces as well. As noted above, in “The Man on the Train” he describes how violence is needed to bring about awareness and connection between isolated individuals. In “The Loss of the Creature,” he claims that one of the few ways to make an individual aware of one’s position, not as “a consumer of prepared experience” but as “a sovereign wayfarer” is “by ordeal...in these cases, the simulacrum of everydayness of consumption has been destroyed by disaster”

²⁰ Lewis Lawson traces this motif in Percy’s work back to Percy’s reading of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. Lawson notes the similarity between this particular scene in *The Moviegoer* and the language that Percy uses to describe Prince Andrei’s injury in his “Man on a Train” essay, where Percy writes: “Prince Andrei transcended everydayness and came to himself for the first time when he lay wounded on the field of Borodino” (*Message* 99). Lawson notes that Percy did not see Prince Andrei’s injury as leading to “permanent relief from alienation” (412); in Percy’s own work, these violent moments are the often the precursors to the kinds of radical reorientation that does provide such permanent relief.

(*Message* 60). “Notes for a Novel about the End of the World” contains Percy’s most extensive explanation of his fictional technique: “How does he [the Christian novelist] set about writing, having cast his lot with a discredited Christendom and having inherited a defunct vocabulary? He does the only thing he can do. Like Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, he calls on every ounce of cunning, craft, and guile he can muster from the darker regions of his soul. The fictional use of violence, shock, comedy, insult, the bizarre, are the everyday tools of his trade” (*Message* 118). And he concludes the essay with an even more concrete claim for why violence features so prominently in his fiction, and it points toward the fiction’s transformative role on the individual reader’s consciousness: “Perhaps it is only through the conjuring up of catastrophe, the destruction of all Exxon signs, and the sprouting of vines in the church pews, that the novelist can make vicarious use of catastrophe in order that he and his reader may come to themselves” (118).

Percy not only believed that moments of violence shake the individual out of the malaise and opened the way for insight, but he also, like O’Connor, linked this thematic concern to his fictional method itself. Percy, like many mid-century American artists, believed that he was running up against the limits of what fiction could say or do.²¹ Percy found this to be a particular problem for the Christian writer, because while all language was, in a sense, exhausted, the language of religion was particularly worn out. In “How to Be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic” (1984) he explained the “serious impediments in the current historical manifestation of Christendom” that

²¹ See, in particular, John Barth’s “The Literature of Exhaustion,” where he describes how the contemporary writer needs to navigate “the used-upness of certain forms or the felt exhaustion of certain possibilities” (64).

make it particularly difficult to write about God and religion in a way that is fresh and interesting:

It has to do with the devaluation of the Christian vocabulary and the media inflation of its contents. The old words, God, grace, sin, redemption, which used to signify within a viable semiotic system, now tend to be either exhausted, worn slick as poker chips and signifying as little, or else are heard as the almost random noise of radio and TV preachers. The very word 'Christian' is not good news to most readers. (*Signposts* 180)

In order to overcome this malaise within the very language itself, the Christian novelist must adopt the position not “of edification but rather that of challenge, offense, shock, attack, subversion” (181). As O’Connor did before him, Percy argues that the Christian writer must use a sort of literary violence in order to prevent his Christian vision from being subsumed within the predefined parameters of what qualifies as “Christian.” Paradoxically, only by appearing *not* to be Christian can the work reveal its Christian message.

This helps to explain Percy’s reticence within his fiction to provide clear, edifying endings. As Binx states at the end of *The Moviegoer*, “As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject” (237), which is a rather coy position to take since he has been detailing the progress of this search for more than 200 pages. We know that he has entered into a somewhat strange but certainly necessary and fulfilling marriage to Kate, and has decided to become a doctor, in order to “listen to people...[to] hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along” (233). What he has achieved in the end looks, to use Taylor’s terminology, an awful lot like human flourishing, not existential transcendence, and yet Percy intimates that the final destination of Binx’s

journey is a place beyond this human flourishing. The conclusion of the novel contains subtle hints that Binx has found some sort of meaning in a return to the Catholic faith; John Desmond describes Binx at the end of the novel as finally living “in communion with others” (*Community* 78), particularly in his “commitment to Kate in marriage,” in his work as a doctor, and in his faith in the Catholic “belief in the resurrection of the body” (55), which he affirms when he tells his relatives that his half-brother Lonnie will be made whole “when Our Lord raises us up on the last day” (*Moviegoer* 240). The most explicitly Catholic aspect of the conclusion, though, takes place on Ash Wednesday, when Binx watches a man walk out of Catholic mass and he wonders if the man truly “believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bon Enfants” (235). Binx’s unanswered question leads the reader to consider this possibility, though no definitive answer is forthcoming in the text. It also indicates that this is a question that Binx himself will continue to ponder. So while, in Binx’s words, “It is impossible to say” what, if anything, he has accomplished through his quest, we know he has been changed over the course of the novel, and we are left to reflect on the nature of this change. By leaving the ending ambiguous, Percy leads his readers to ask a series of questions: did Binx finish his search – did he find what he was looking for – is it just a matter of time before he once more succumbs to the malaise of everydayness? By asking them of Binx, we might ask them of ourselves.

As Gary Ciuba explains, “the deliberate irresolution of Percy’s novels, in which love is so often imperfect and faith seems so unfinished, rejects any completely realized eschatology. His novels always intimate that there is more to come and often express this

incompleteness by looking to some future consummation. But since this end is ultimately unspeakable, his novels have more to say about the hope and love that must begin in the present” (*Revelation 22*). John Sykes concurs, indicating that “the revelation Percy strives to bring about is one that happens off the page, so to speak, in an existential encounter that happens after the reader closes the book” but, since the “grace-filled events in Percy’s fiction are nearly invisible” they are “therefore easily missed” (5-6). Percy’s inconclusive endings have much in common with what I termed O’Connor’s “witness” fictions, where explanations are withheld, but while O’Connor’s stories strongly imply a horizon of transcendence, Percy’s fictions do not. Certainly, transcendence is possible in Percy’s work, and it is even hinted at, but its presence or absence is left intentionally vague. Percy does not provide answers because answers preclude the necessity of a search, and his primary goal is to initiate the search, to make the individual question his or her assumptions, no matter what they may be. Percy believes that such questioning will result, as it did for him, in the embrace of faith, but he is unwilling to impose that system of belief on his readers.

A Pattern Revised: Violence and the Failure of Insight in *Lancelot*

Percy’s use of ambiguity and misdirection is evident throughout his fiction, but his most nuanced engagement with it is found in his fourth novel, *Lancelot*. While the threat of apocalypse hangs over *Love in the Ruins*, the killing of the old and the young has become legalized in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, and Will Barrett’s graphic memory of his father’s suicide functions as a focal point of *The Second Coming*, *Lancelot* is Percy’s darkest and most violent novel. It is the only one of Percy’s novels to dwell on personal

violence, directed from one individual toward another; the novel is narrated by Lancelot Lamar, who is incarcerated in a “Center for Aberrant Behavior” after murdering his wife and her lover, along with two others. *Lancelot* is Percy’s most extreme treatment of his principle themes; in this novel he depicts the violent outcome of both the personal anguish of the alienated individual and the dehumanizing tendencies of totalizing narratives. The novel also calls into question many of the beliefs regarding society that Percy himself espouses in his essays and other novels; *Lancelot* gives voice to Percy’s condemnations of the modern age, but in Lance’s mouth these critiques become just one more example of the dangers of extremism and the inherent risk of subscribing too fully to any one worldview.

Lancelot is, in many ways, a reenactment of the themes and events of *The Moviegoer*, but while the earlier novel is a mild comedy, Lance Lamar’s story is thoroughly dark. Both novels feature protagonists who profess a belief in scientism, who suffer from the modern malaise, and who are subsequently shocked out of this condition into quests for knowledge, but in each instance Lance’s experience is more extreme than Binx’s, and his quests(s) lead to much more sinister results. Even in their broader arcs, the two novels share similarities: for instance, both novels are heavily invested in the concept of the movies, but whereas Binx merely watches them, and is content to observe how the form of the movies provides a template for one’s life, Lance’s life becomes completely enmeshed in them. His home becomes a movie set, and his wife and daughter become romantically involved with the movie actors and producers; he himself enacts the role of the jealous husband character from a B movie as he uses a Bowie knife to carry

out the revenge plot. Both novels critique the way the movie business creates a simulacrum of the world, which in turn becomes more real for the consumers of the movies than anything else,²² but *Lancelot* questions the very idea of “the real” by drawing attention to the way in which one’s conception of reality is shaped by the images one consumes. As Lance observes, “What was nutty was that the movie folk were trafficking in illusions in a real world but the real world thought its reality could only be found in the illusions” (152). Percy not only indicts the community surrounding Belle Isle for falling prey to the illusions being manufactured by the movie industry, he also condemns Lance for subscribing to a different set of illusions that pervert his sense of reality as well.

In *Lancelot*, Percy turns the well-established pattern of violence/ shock leading to insight/ grace on its head. Twice in the narrative Lance is shocked out of his preconceived notions about reality, but in neither instance does this shock and reorientation lead him toward anything resembling a moment of grace. Before the beginning of the events in his narrative, Lance is a man beset by the malaise of everydayness; he tells Percival, “Do you know what happened to me during the past twenty years? A gradual, ever so gradual, slipping away of my life in a kind of dream state in which finally I could not be sure that anything was happening at all” (57). He is awakened from this stupor by the shock of discovering that his daughter is actually not his biological child, and this discovery spurs him towards a search. In order to reinforce

²² See Susan V. Donaldson’s “Tradition in Amber: Walker Percy’s *Lancelot* as Southern Metafiction” for a fuller treatment of the postmodern aspects of this novel.

the parallel between Binx and Lance, Percy recycles the language of *The Moviegoer*; Lance claims that after the shock of discovering Siobhan was not his child, “I had the feeling I was on to something, perhaps for the first time in my life” (140), a direct echo of Binx’s description of the search: “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (*Moviegoer* 13). But unlike Binx, who eventually eschews his scientism in favor of a “horizontal search” for community and a sense of belonging in the world, Lance begins “a quest for evil” (*Lancelot* 136), and he does so in a scientific manner. We see this in his reaction to the blood test that proves Siobhan cannot be his own child: “There was a sense of astonishment, of discovery, of a new world opening up, but the new world was totally unknown. Where does one go from here? I felt like those two scientists...who did the experiment on the speed of light and kept getting the *wrong* result,” and, like a scientist, he demands objective proof of what has happened: “One must see for oneself...I had to be absolutely certain” (42-43). John Desmond claims that Lancelot’s “posturing as scientist-observer...precludes genuine self-scrutiny and a sense of personal involvement” (*Community* 154). Certainly Lance’s understanding of his quest is self-defeating; he believes he is “on to something” but instead of looking around and attempting to reorient himself, he limits himself to looking from a preconceived vantage point, thus precluding any possibility for insight.²³

²³ Robert Brinkmeyer notes that Lancelot’s ‘original sin’ is a form of pride; his adherence to “the myth of the autonomous self” leads him to disregard “the rights and even the lives of other people (since all value is located within the autonomous self)” (“Dynamics” 161).

Throughout the first arc of the story, which carries Lance from the shock of his discovery to the acts of murder which lead to his imprisonment, he holds himself at a distance from the events of his life; he views his life as if he were a character in a movie: “for the first time, I saw myself and my life just as surely as if I were standing in the dark parlor and watching myself” (57). Even in his search for evidence, his “quest for a true sin,” he inhabits a predetermined narrative; he envisions himself in an Arthurian quest narrative – “So Sir Lancelot set out, looking for something rarer than the Grail. A Sin” (140) – and in his search for evidence he too becomes a moviemaker, filming his wife’s actions in an attempt to capture some sort of evidence, more real and true than the proof of his daughter’s blood type. But what he does not consciously realize is that in his quest for proof of evil, he ultimately comes to carry out the evil action that he is searching for. In a very literal sense, he performs the science experiment, but fails in his observations.

His quest for sin ends in his performing the sin he is searching for, as he murders his wife’s lover with the Bowie knife, but he misinterprets the result. He claims that when he murdered Jacoby he felt nothing, only “numbness and coldness... a lack of feeling” and he contends that this lack of feeling proves that there is no such thing as evil, that there is no “unholy grail just as there was no Holy Grail” (253). But rather than disproving the existence of evil, this absence that he experiences as he commits the murder substantiates the Augustinian (and Thomist) definition of evil as a deprivation, as

the absence of good.²⁴ The end result of the search initiated by the shock of his wife's betrayal is Lancelot's total isolation; Lamar Nisly contends that in this moment, Percy "exposes Lancelot's spiritual emptiness...in his own coldness, his inability even to recognize the evil he is perpetrating, Lancelot has become the unholy grail that he has sought" (*Wingless* 181). But within the framework of the novel, this moment of violence also serves as the possible beginning of a new search.

When Belle Isle explodes, Lance claims "for the first time in thirty years I was moved off the dead center of my life" (266),²⁵ another instantiation of Percy's claim that catastrophe reorients one's sense of self, but for Lancelot this new orientation is just as inverted as his murderous compulsion. After this second shock, the second narrative arc begins; this one entails Lance's quest for a new, pure beginning. It is in this aspect of the novel that we see how much of Percy's own beliefs about the modern world have made it into Lancelot's character. Rather than seeking a reintegration into the world, or atonement for his horrific actions, Lance begins to plot an even grander plan – a "new order" for the world, based not on "Catholicism or Communism or fascism or liberalism or capitalism or any ism at all, but simply on that stern rectitude valued by the new breed and marked by the violence which will attend its breach" (158). Although Lance claims that this new order is not based in any "ism," it is clearly a form of totalitarianism

²⁴ Percy indicates that he had this conception of evil in mind when writing this scene: "When he [Lancelot] gets to the heart of evil, what he thinks is evil, he finds nothing – which is incidentally, orthodox Thomist doctrine, you know. Thomas Aquinas defines evil as the absence of essence" (*Conversations* 155).

²⁵ The phrase "off the dead center" is the exact phrase used by Kate in *The Moviegoer* as justification for her suicide attempt (181).

grounded in a twisted union of the kind of stoicism espoused by Binx's Aunt Emily and the most extreme elements of Percy's own condemnations of modernity.²⁶ Lance's vision for the future is Percy's clearest indictment of all types of fundamentalism, even one based in beliefs that he is sympathetic too, for it must be said that Lance's critique of modernity is, in large part, Percy's. Lance condemns contemporary American society for its vices, its ambiguities, and its lack of coherence and order, and his proclamations about the new society he will build in Virginia are the (almost logical) endpoint of the line of reasoning Percy espouses in his essays. But while Lance's vision of modernity is similar to Percy's, his response to the end of the modern age is not the same as Percy's, or Guardini's, for that matter. Where Guardini saw total humility and obedience to God as the solution, and Percy finds a way beyond the modern malaise in the embrace of community and a tentative but sincere return to the sacraments, Lancelot seeks to impose his vision on the world, and the center of Lance's vision is his own sense of right and wrong. *Lancelot* is Percy's demonstration that such a grounding is not, cannot be, adequate. In *Lancelot*, we can see that Percy recognizes the seduction of believing that one is right; by putting many of his own attacks on contemporary culture into the mouth of a character like Lance Lamar, Percy undermines his own didactic tendencies. In place of the imposition of metanarratives, Percy champions subtlety and ambiguity; he positions Percival's silent transformation as the counterweight to Lance's violent ideology.

²⁶ See Sykes Chapter 7 for more on the stoic roots of Lance's new world order.

Through Lance's journey, Percy critiques the trope that moments of shock and violence lead to real insight, and shows that critiquing the modern world is not the same thing as changing it. But while the novel demonstrates the inherent dangers in trying to remake the world as you see fit, it does offer an understated hint of how things might change; in rebuttal to Lance's all-encompassing monologic worldview, Percy offers Percival's nearly total silence. Numerous critics have noted that the story is just as much Percival's as it is Lance's²⁷; the true journey of insight that takes place happens almost entirely off the page. Although we do not hear his voice until the final page of the novel, we know that he has changed from a position of disengaged detachment to a recommitment to his priestly vocation, lived in service to the poor. As Lance says, dismissively, "You plan to take a little church in Alabama, Father, preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives... What's the new beginning in that? Isn't that just more of the same?" (256-57). Lance's final question is also the reader's question, and perhaps it is Percy's as well. Can such actions really serve as an effective counter to both Lance's totalitarian urge for control, and to the despair at the heart of the modern age? Percival does not explain how this can be so, but his final "Yes" indicates that he believes it to be true. The question lingers long after the reader closes the book.

Once more, Percy offers Catholicism as a possible answer to the troubles of modernity, but, as in his other novels, the Catholicism that he champions is not

²⁷See, for instance, Simone Vauthier's "Story, Story-Teller and Listener: Notes on Lancelot" for a particularly nuanced account of the dynamic encounter between Lance and Percival.

hierarchical and bureaucratic, but rather a form of Catholic subsidiarity, which practices direct service and humility.²⁸ Although we do not hear Percival's account of how he has changed, or what has changed him, we can infer that it was his encounter with Lancelot's narrative that precipitated his reorientation. So what the novel finally reinforces is, once again, the pattern of shock, or encountering violence (even narrative violence), as the precursor to change. Within Percy's worldview, we need to be "moved off the dead center" of our lives in order to truly live; if we are not shocked into the awareness of our condition as individuals who must choose a way to be in the world, we are (perhaps unknowingly) in despair. And so he uses his fiction to spur his readers onto the journey, hoping that we, like Percival, will be led to reflection, and this reflection will lead us not only to insight, but ultimately to a life lived in humble service. It is important to note the form the Percival's transformation takes. In his role as servant priest, Percival will not be putting himself first. In this novel, Percy is offering a different vision for how the alienated individual will find meaning – not in the single community of love formed between two people, which is the ending found in many of Percy's other novels. Here Percy demonstrates that to love is to serve, to value something, or someone, more than oneself, which is the most overtly Christian message in Percy's work, and that stands in sharpest contrast to the doctrinal ideology condemned by the novel. The "Yes" which ends the novel is a vision of meaning that transcends the self, and it comes about because Percival hears the story of violence and is transformed.

²⁸ This is the form of Catholicism that appears in Val Vaught's work with the Tyree children in *The Last Gentleman* or Fr. Smith's work with the old and dying in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

Or at least that is my interpretation of Percy's fictional project, but the ambiguity of his novels allows, even necessitates, that each reader determine this on his or her own. Any critical attempt to summarize, moralize, or sermonize is diametrically opposed to what I see as Percy's primary goal for his fiction, which is to initiate in each reader his or her own reflection on the source of ultimate meaning. For Percy, the goal of fiction is to spur the reader towards a search for insight, because to search is to be onto something, and not to be onto something is to be in despair.

Tim Gautreaux and the Paradoxical Embrace of the Everyday

In a number of interviews, Tim Gautreaux has identified himself as a Catholic novelist, in large part because he writes about questions of morality from a Catholic perspective: "I consider myself to be a Catholic writer in the tradition of Walker Percy. If a story does not deal with a moral question, I don't think it's much of a story" (*Conversations* 11). But while he repeatedly acknowledges his debt to, and admiration of, both Percy and O'Connor, he also draws a clear distinction between his work and theirs: "I'm not a philosopher like Walker Percy... I'm just a Catholic from the bayou" (23). For Gautreaux, Catholicism is both a source of morality and the cultural system in which he and his characters operate: "It's impossible to write about South Louisiana culture without writing about the Catholic Church, because it permeates everything – from wedding ceremonies to industrial fishing to the sugarcane industry to the way people think about eating on Friday. A lot of my stories have priests in them or references to going to Mass or confession, and that's because of what I'm writing about" (18). But Catholicism provides more than the cultural milieu for his stories, it is also the guiding

principle for his characters. When asked why his characters repeatedly intervene to help in the lives of their neighbors, or even strangers, he responds: “All of that comes from being raised Catholic where we have been taught to help people who are less fortunate than we are, not just by praying for them but by actually going out and fixing their busted air conditioners and stuff” (147).²⁹ For Gautreaux, more than for Percy or O’Connor, Catholicism is manifested in the practical activities of everyday life³⁰; in his work, Catholicism is the driving force for social action rather than an answer to metaphysical concerns.

Gautreaux’s work offers a much more hope filled vision of humanity than that found in his fellow American Catholic writers. Unlike O’Connor and Percy, Gautreaux does not write apocalyptic fiction; one does not get the sense when reading his work that we are living in the end of an age. His depiction of America is of a fallen world, but one still imbued with grace. His characters are still beset by troubles, and evil and violence still threaten them, but more often than not they respond to the obstacles of life with love, service, and kindness, and they do this out of a Catholic sense of justice. Gautreaux writes stories in which characters act cruelly towards the innocent or the helpless (“Little Frogs in a Ditch” and “Sorry Blood,” with its O’Connor-like title, come to mind), but even in these stories, the vision of human cruelty is countered by other

²⁹ Of course, Gautreaux is not arguing that this moral principle is unique to Catholicism, but rather that his characters act in this manner because they have been raised in a Catholic environment that holds these actions up as moral virtues.

³⁰ See Lamar Nisly’s *Wingless Chickens, Bayou Catholics and Pilgrim Wayfarers: Construction of Audience and Tone in O’Connor, Gautreaux, and Percy* (2011) for an extensive discussion of how these authors’ experiences of Catholicism were largely shaped by their various sociological environments, and how these differences influenced the manifestations of Catholicism within their work.

characters' acts of compassion. And it is far more common in a Gautreaux story for one character, when faced with another's suffering, to work to rectify it, as in "The Bug Man" or "The Piano Tuner." These characters are not always successful in transforming the lives of those they seek to help, but their effort does have a significant impact on the one who acts; it is a mark of grace.

Gautreaux's Catholic fiction does not deal with existential questions about the meaning of life, and his story arcs do not call for the violent inbreaking of grace to change his characters.³¹ Rather, his Catholic sensibility champions the value of community and the presence of grace in the everyday. But while his fiction embodies a different notion of what Catholicism means, vis-a-vis the modern world, it still follows the structure for Catholic fiction laid out by O'Connor and Percy. We can see the structural parallels along with the thematic differences by looking at his first novel, *The Next Step in the Dance* (1998), which parallels *The Moviegoer* in a number of ways, as well as at the title story of Gautreaux's first collection, "Same Place, Same Things,"³² which, in its depiction of a violent encounter between strangers, follows the structure of any number of O'Connor's stories. In both instances, though, while the structure is

³¹ Lamar Nisly, Gautreaux's best critic, sees the difference between Gautreaux and his Southern Catholic predecessors as a question of audience. He argues that O'Connor and Percy saw their audience as hostile or indifferent to their Catholic message, but Gautreaux views his as "companions" and, as such, he "feels no need to make a case for Catholic beliefs and values or the importance of community because they have become ingrained in him and, he assumes, in his audience" (*Wingless* 136). I think this is too simplistic an account of both Gautreaux's imagined audience and his fictional aims, and that his work does challenge his readers to engage with a Catholic worldview, but that the specific nature of this Catholicism, with its emphasis on practical action over transcendent signification, is where the principle difference between his work and O'Connor and Percy's resides.

³² The story first appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in June 1991, and was republished as the first story in his first collection *Same Place, Same Things* (1996).

similar, the way Gautreaux depicts the movement of grace within the human community is radically different.

Early Work: Using and Revising the Literary Patterns of Catholic Fiction

The Next Step in the Dance is set in the small coastal town of Tiger Island, Louisiana, and focuses on a young married couple, Paul and Colette Thibodeaux. Paul divides his time between working as a mechanic, and going to movies, drinking, and basically living an aimless, goalless existence, while his beautiful wife Colette desires something more from life. Fed up with Paul's fecklessness, Collette leaves him and heads out to California, to find "people who sparkle" (23), and eventually Paul follows to win her back. After finding good jobs and making a fair amount of money they become disenchanted with the superficiality of California and end up back in Tiger Island, where the economy has tanked because of the oil bust of the 1980s. They have a number of trials and tribulations that eventually lead them both to realize they still love and need each other. It is, in many ways, a love story, but an unglamourized one; it is also a story about Cajun culture in a specific time and place, and when the novel has been reviewed, this is what the critics tend to focus on. But by reading the novel in connection to *The Moviegoer*, we can recast Gautreaux's work in a more complex light. Both novels are versions of the coming of age story. They revolve around young men who are trying to figure out how to live well in the modern world – a world in which traditional standards of moral and ethical behavior are being challenged or discarded.

Gautreaux said that in his course on fiction writing, Percy "was not very opinionated as to what we should write about, but he was very adamant in letting us

know that we're all on some kind of quest. The writer is always looking for something, the characters are always looking for something. ...For Percy, it was, at least in part, always spiritual. We are looking for what makes us happy, and the characters are looking for what makes them happy. And for Percy it wasn't money, and it wasn't fame. So what was it? Well, he never really told us, but you could guess" (*Conversations* 112).

Gautreaux is right to draw attention to Percy's decision not to tell his readers (or his students) what it was that they should be seeking, but I think Gautreaux's substitution of happiness as the goal of the search helps to differentiate the student's work from the teacher's, because in my reading Percy's novels are not really about happiness. They might initially appear to be, and the characters might even think this is what they are looking for, but Percy is actually interested in pushing his characters, and readers, to look beyond worldly happiness toward a more transcendent orientation. As Percy biographer Jay Tolson points out, for Percy, "the true character of evil" is "the despair and emptiness that drive people toward the endless pursuit of happiness in the first place; the despair, moreover, which can be healed only by its acknowledgment, and by acknowledgment of its cause – man's radical alienation from his soul and his creator" (Tolson 456). Both *The Next Step in the Dance* and *The Moviegoer* are, in a sense, quest novels, but the natures of these quests differ. Binx is trying to figure out if it is possible to live a *meaningful* life, while Paul and Colette are trying to live *happy* lives.

For Percy, modern men and women are alienated because they lack community, but Gautreaux's novel challenges this position, and contends that community is still possible – granted, in small, isolated pockets – and, since this community exists, that

Percy's existential angst is not a universal given. Whereas Percy contends that there is a "breakdown of the consensus, of a common language, a shared discourse denoting a common set of referents" (*Signposts* 157), Gautreaux's work is focused a community that is built around common language and referents. Paul and Colette do not need to seek for a sense of self because their true identities are to be found in relation to the community of Tiger Island, where everyone holds similar customs and beliefs; they share a culture. Outsiders, whether they are Texans or Californians, can threaten this culture, but this threat does not turn Paul and Colette into alienated individuals. Paul and Colette may not know what they want out of life, and they may make poor life decisions, but they are not afflicted by Binx's existential dread that perhaps there is nothing worth wanting in life and that nothing truly matters.

When we first encounter Paul, though, he is in a similar state to one of Percy's protagonists – he is sunk in everydayness. In the first scene he is at a drive-in movie – he is, in a possible homage to Percy's work, literally a moviegoer. And, like Binx, he is content to be a spectator in his own life. Although Binx is certainly more introspective than Paul, neither young man is particularly engaged in the life they are living at the start of their novels. Both need to be shaken out of their apathy, and both novelists use moments of violence and shock to accomplish this. The initial shock to Paul's system that wakens him out of his malaise is Colette's leaving him; this incident is not violent or life threatening, so it does differ in extremity from the shocks administered in O'Connor and Percy's work, but its outcome is similar. Soon after Colette leaves for California, Paul drives around Tiger Island, and he is quite obviously truly *seeing* the place for the first

time. Binx says that the search allows a person to actually see their life for what it is, with fresh eyes: “I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn’t miss a trick” (*Moviegoer* 13). Paul does exactly this, as he drives around town, and instead of the familiar people and places, he sees anew his “drunk relatives, unusual dogs, weather-ruined houses. It seemed that the town he’d become used to like an old pair of pants no longer fit him” (68). His moment of pain and loss opens up the possibility of his own search, which leads him to leave the comforts of home to pursue his wife in California.

The episode out west in California is Colette and Paul’s attempt at what Percy, drawing on Kierkegaard, called a rotation – an attempt to go somewhere new to find meaning in life. Gautreaux’s interest in this section is primarily about contrasting Paul and Colette’s wealth of family and friends in Tiger Island with the depersonalized, materialistic world of LA. But, in what is an unsurprising turn of events to readers of O’Connor and Percy, what ultimately challenges both Paul and Colette to reevaluate what matters in their lives is a series of violent accidents and near death experiences.

Throughout the second half of *The Next Step in the Dance* Gautreaux repeatedly puts Percy’s claim that violence leads to insight and self-awareness into practice, as both Paul and Colette continually come close to dying. Paul is locked in a steam boiler and nearly murdered by Colette’s new boyfriend; Colette falls out of her boat, is knocked unconscious and nearly drowns; Paul’s shrimping vessel is shipwrecked in a storm and he is presumed dead. In each of these instances, both characters come away from the experiences with new insights about what matters in their lives – namely, they come to

actually see and appreciate the reality of the unique personhood of the other, and the necessity of reintegrating into the community of Tiger Island. This leads to the happy reunion that ends the novel.

The overall structure of *The Next Step in the Dance* follows a similar pattern to that found in *The Moviegoer*, in which characters who are living aimless lives are, through moments of shock and violence, shaken out of their malaise and begin searches for something more out of life, and both novels end with a vision of domestic harmony. All that being said, there is a key difference between the horizons of expectations found in these two novels: Percy's fiction points beyond mere happiness and fulfillment towards a horizon of transcendence, whereas Gautreaux is interested in bringing his characters to a place where they achieve immanent fulfillment, not existential transcendence. Paul and Colette, in Charles Taylor's terms, are failing to achieve the position of "human flourishing," which he describes as the goal for most moderns; at the beginning of the novel they do not "strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practicing a vocation we find fulfilling...which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare" (7). Initially, they are not finding contentment in their routines of work and marriage, and their journey is towards a place where these things do give them some sort of fulfillment. While Binx is searching for something beyond the limits of 'human flourishing,' Paul and Colette are just trying to achieve it in the first place. But what is most interesting about these different horizons of expectations for the main characters is that both novels end in the same place. Paul and Colette's journey culminates with them reunited in a happier, more fulfilling marriage, working more meaningful and important

jobs, and firmly embedded in their community and culture; a position that is very similar to that of Binx and Kate at the end of *The Moviegoer*. But while the endings are similar, they leave the reader with radically different sensations. We respond to Gautreaux's work with a happy, contented sigh. The ending is tidy and unambiguous – it is what we have expected and longed for all along. Because there is no ambiguity about the outcomes, and there is no hint that there is more to life than this sort of happiness, Gautreaux's novel, unlike Percy's, is not, ultimately, a challenging or transformative one. But there is something to commend about Gautreaux's approach, in which the struggle to live a meaningful life does not need to be attended to by existential angst. Perhaps living a life of deep human flourishing, connected to one's family, friends and community, and being aware that one is doing it, is to be “on to something” after all, and the depiction of such a life is worth championing in its own right.

“Same Place, Same Things,” one of Gautreaux's earliest published stories, portrays a similar worldview to that found in *The Next Step in the Dance*, in which a commitment to doing good, meaningful work, and an inherent sense of moral decency, serve as counter measures to the evil and violence of the world. The story is in many ways a prototypical Gautreaux story, featuring a working class protagonist who, in the course of doing his work, encounters an isolated individual who is in need of help; it is also very reminiscent of O'Connor's fiction,³³ both in its depiction of the violent collision

³³ Julie Kane, in her entry on Gautreaux in *Twenty-First Century American Novelists*, notes a number of similarities between this story and O'Connor's work, including “the 1930s Southern rural setting, the attractive traveling ‘mystery man,’ the sudden turn toward violence, and the hope of grace and transcendence.” All of these O'Connor-esque elements are present, but they take on a very different

between strangers and in the parallels it makes between the natural world and the dramatic action of the story. Harry Lintel is a pump repairman who travels throughout the drought ravaged depression-era South doing “repairs... that no one else could manage” (5); on one house call, he finds the man of the house dead at the pump, the victim of an apparent accident, and soon thereafter the widow, Ada, begins to follow Harry on his repair runs. She wants to escape from the emptiness of her life, and she thinks that going on the road with Harry will provide her with that freedom. Initially, the story follows a pattern that we are familiar with: a sudden, shocking death leads an isolated individual to question and change her life. Ada, in the immediate aftermath of her husband’s death, confesses, ““Sometimes I think it’s staying in the same places, doing the same things, day in, day out, that gets me down. Get up in the morning and look out the window and see that same rusty fence. Look out another window and see that same willow tree. Out another and see that field. Same place, same things, all my life”” (13). She appears to be suffering from the malaise of everydayness, and the death of her husband and the simultaneous appearance of the outsider will provide her with the opportunity to reinvent her life, to wake up to the possibility of more than just empty routine.

But, in a refreshing twist, that is not the story that Gautreaux is telling. In fact, he is subtly critiquing that narrative convention, for it turns out that Ada has actually murdered her husband, most likely after seeing Harry’s ad and deciding that she could take care of two problems at once by ridding herself of her husband and then using the

valence in Gautreaux’s story. The traveling ‘mystery man’ in Gautreaux’s story, unlike Manley Pointer or Mr. Shiftlet, is the victim, not the purveyor, of violence, and this act of violence is not redemptive for any of the actors involved in the drama.

traveling repairman to escape from her situation. She views violence as the easiest means of reinventing her life; by removing the obstacles in her path she thinks she can change her circumstances without actually changing herself. In Gautreaux's story, though, this violence is not ultimately transformative for any of the characters. Harry is intrigued by Ada's offer of accompaniment; he is a widower, and the possibility of having a companion on his travels is clearly appealing to him, and he also wants to do what he can to "heal what was wrong" with Ada (13). But he also realizes the limits of his abilities and knows that some broken things cannot be fixed. He intuits that something is not right about Ada and her situation, so returns to her house and discovers that she left the pump switch on in order to electrocute her husband; after this discovery, "he put his face down into his hands and shook like a man who had just missed being in a terrible accident" (14). He sees his brush with Ada as an encounter with his own mortality, and he thinks that in discovering her secret, and subsequently avoiding her, that he has escaped a terrible fate. In this, too, he is mistaken.

Harry, like many an O'Connor protagonist, has a high opinion of his own abilities (and, oddly enough, his automobile): "He gazed fondly at his Ford...It could take him anywhere, and with his tools he could fix anything but the weather" (7). In an O'Connor story, the protagonist would ultimately be disabused of this sense of surety and be forced to recognize his or her limitations, or, if the protagonist fails to recognize these limitations, then the reader at least will be alerted to the ways in which the protagonist

has failed.³⁴ And although the story follows the pattern used so often by O'Connor, in which the protagonist is assaulted, robbed of his automobile and left for dead, the lingering effect of the story is neither one of condemnation of Harry Lintel for his foolish pride, nor of wonder at the presence of transcendent grace amidst tragedy. Harry, at the end of the story, is not remarkably different from Harry at the beginning of the story. Perhaps the difference between Harry and an O'Connor protagonist can be attributed to the qualification that the narrator places on Harry's sense of his own mastery: Harry knows that although he is able to fix the pumps, and therefore provide some measure of relief from the drought, he cannot address the source of the problem. He cannot fix the drought, and, in a similar fashion, he recognizes the limits on his ability to "heal what was wrong" with Ada. After he discovers that she has stowed away in his truck in order to accompany him out of town, he tells her as much, "Where you want to go...I can't take you" and "If I could help you, I'd bring you along for the ride...But I can't do a thing for you" (15-16). Throughout the story, Harry has been aware of the severely limited horizons available to Ada and he is sympathetic to her situation, so much so that he does not turn her in to the police, but at the same time he recognizes that "she was a woman who would never get where she wanted to go" (17). Ada seems to believe that by escaping from her home she will be able to reinvent herself and escape her malaise, but

³⁴ Ed Piacento reads Gautreaux's story in this way, as being about a "self-absorbed and standoffish" man whose failure to help Ada indicates that "the prospect of meaningful connections with others in the future seems unlikely" (116-17). I think that readers might be inclined to interpret the story in this way in large part because O'Connor's fiction teaches us to read it this way – within her fiction, the protagonists almost always have an unacknowledged fault, upon which the [violent] action of the story hinges. I am arguing that Gautreaux is conscious of this pattern, and deliberately inverts it, in order to draw attention to human decency and morality, not the lack thereof.

Gautreaux's story indicates that such a reinvention is impossible, because what troubles Ada is internal and thus inescapable.

Ada uses violence to get what she wants (she knocks Harry unconscious with his own tools and steals his truck), but this moment of violence is not transformative or redemptive. Ada, we learn, has already murdered three husbands, and there is no reason to believe that her encounter with Harry has changed her in any way; she is fleeing to a new situation that will be no different from her earlier ones. At the same time, there is no reason to believe that this experience has changed Harry either. Harry has been a decent man throughout the story, and the mark of grace that concludes the story – the “dove singing on the phone wires” over Harry's head after he regains consciousness (16) – is not indicative of some newfound grace, or even insight, that Harry has gained as a result of his encounter with Ada; instead, it confirms the grace that has been present in Harry all along. In Gautreaux's story, the character who suffers violence does not need to do so in order to change his or her worldview; in this instance Harry proved himself to be a good man long before he is attacked and left for dead by Ada.

“Same Place, Same Things” shows Gautreaux using the pattern of violence established by his Catholic predecessors, but for a different end. Harry, like many of Gautreaux's protagonists, is not depicted as a sinful person in need of redemption; rather, he is shown to be a decent human being who is doing his best to reach out to others and help them in whatever way he can, while at the same time recognizing that he is a limited, fallible person, and that he cannot help, or redeem, everyone. His job is to fix what he can, and move on. This is entirely within keeping with the Catholic vision found

in Gautreaux's work, in which love and service are valued over existential questions about ultimate meaning. Gautreaux's Catholicism is more practical, and more committed to depicting how Catholic principles can be embodied in day to day life. For Gautreaux, love and service are the way to move one's self, and perhaps one's neighbor, beyond the malaise of the everyday, and toward some possible awareness of a sacramental reality at work in the world. In Gautreaux's fiction, the performative actions of charity can become an instantiation of a transcendent presence at work in the world, although this sacramental reality often goes unacknowledged.

“What you do will say who you are”: Gautreaux's Engagement with the Literature of Violence

Gautreaux's fiction, like that of Percy and O'Connor, maintains a steady focus on violence in the modern world, but Gautreaux, writing in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, is less apocalyptic than either Percy or O'Connor. Although the threat of annihilation that pervades the work of the earlier two writers is not present in Gautreaux's fiction, he is still interested in examining the role of violence in America, and more than any other Catholic novelist he uses his work to reflect the post-conciliar Catholic understanding of violence.

Gautreaux's exploration of violence has drawn the attention of his critics. Margaret Donovan Bauer, the author of the first book length study of Gautreaux, notes that in both *The Clearing* and *The Missing*, “Gautreaux continues his deconstruction of romantic notions of war and his exploration of the ravages of war that persist after peace is declared” (175). The Mennonite scholar and critic Lamar Nisly, though, has done the

most to emphasize how Gautreaux's depiction of violence reflects a Catholic worldview.³⁵ His articles on *The Clearing*, "Presbyterian Pennsylvanians at a Louisiana Sawmill, or Just how Catholic is Gautreaux's *The Clearing*?" (2005), and *The Missing*, "Tim Gautreaux's *The Missing*: Journeys of Vengeance or Belonging?" (2011), focus predominantly on Gautreaux's treatment of violence, and Nisly makes a compelling case that Gautreaux's work is reflective of Catholic social teaching, which "affirm[s] the centrality of nonviolent responses in the face of evil action" ("Vengeance" 196). Nisly's work provides a helpful overview of the turn toward nonviolence within the contemporary Catholic Church, noting the appearance of "a strand of Catholic social thought [that] rejects the common assumption that redemptive violence is needed to redress a wrong or that vengeance is the necessary response to an evil act" (197).

Any discussion of contemporary Catholicism's stance on war, violence, peace and justice in the modern age needs to begin with two documents: Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), and *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), one of the four apostolic constitutions of Vatican II. *Gaudium et Spes* takes up the role of the Catholic Church vis-à-vis the violence of the modern world in Chapter V: The Fostering of Peace and the Promotion of a Community of Nations, in which the council writes, "The unique hazard of modern warfare consists in this: it provides those who possess modern scientific weapons with a kind of occasion for perpetrating...abominations; moreover, through a certain inexorable chain of events, it can catapult men into the most atrocious decisions" (80). In response to this state of affairs, the Catholic Church advocates an understanding

³⁵ Nisly's membership in one of the traditional peace churches seems relevant.

of peace “which goes beyond what justice can provide” and acknowledges that “since the human will is unsteady and wounded by sin, the achievement of peace requires a constant mastering of passions and the vigilance of lawful authority” (78). The document goes on to note, “we cannot fail to praise those who renounce the use of violence in the vindication of their rights and who resort to methods of defense which are otherwise available to weaker parties too” (78). While the drafters of the document stop short of embracing pacifism as the only response to war, they do recognize the rights of conscientious objectors to war, and condemn all weapons of mass destruction (79, 80). This document, on the role of the Church in the modern world, lays out a vision of Catholicism which condemns violence and the abuse of power, and which helped shape the Catholic social teaching that has come to play such a significant role in the postconciliar Church.

Pope John XXIII, in *Pacem in Terris*, indicates that one of the sources of the violence of the modern age can be attributed to the lack of proper moral formation, and that one of the failings of modern society is that Christians are not taught how to be moral and virtuous:

We consider too that a further reason for this very frequent divorce between faith and practice in Christians is an inadequate education in Christian teaching and Christian morality. In many places the amount of energy devoted to the study of secular subjects is all too often out of proportion to that devoted to the study of religion. Scientific training reaches a very high level, whereas religious training generally does not advance beyond the elementary stage. It is essential, therefore, that the instruction given to our young people be complete and continuous, and imparted in such a way that moral goodness and the cultivation of religious values may keep pace with scientific knowledge and continually advancing technical progress. Young people must also be taught how to carry out their own particular obligations in a truly fitting manner. (153)

Much of Gautreaux's work turns upon this very question of how individuals in the modern world should go about carrying out their moral obligations, and how the failure to do so contributes to the pervasive violence of modernity. When responding to a question about how the contemporary Catholic Church differs from the pre-Vatican II Church, he emphasizes the shortcomings of moral formation for youth: "If there is a difference for Catholics younger than myself, if people are less observant or devout, it's not because of popular culture so much, or liberal theologians, or the lack of priests, or the pressure of being religious in an overcrowded affluent urban area. It's the lack of nuns as teachers. . . . The nuns were positive examples for us, especially the teaching nuns. They lived the religion they taught, owning nothing, rising before dawn to pray and prepare lesson plans" (*Conversations* 123). Although it is unlikely that Gautreaux would consciously view his work as a form of moral formation for his readers, the form of his stories and novels does facilitate this function. Within his fiction he depicts scenarios that call for a moral response, particularly in his portrayal of the moral complexity surrounding the use of violence, and asks that his characters, and his readers along with them, ponder the most virtuous course of action. Although Gautreaux never reveals any 'correct' answer to the dilemmas he poses, his positioning of the issues does reflect the nuanced position of post-Vatican II Catholicism.

This is best encapsulated in a minor but significant character from *The Clearing*, Marshall Merville. As a lawman, Merville must often use force to keep the peace, but he never does so recklessly, or without remorse. Early in the novel, he articulates the moral

conundrum that runs throughout the book: ““You know, I got a friend who's a priest. He says it's a sin to kill. I got no problem with that, but what if I don't kill one, and that one kills two or three? Did I kill that two or three? I can't figure that out, me”” (59-60).³⁶

Gautreaux does not give a clear-cut solution to this problem; it is something that all of the characters, and the reader, are left to wrestle with. The novel does indicate that Merville's most heroic action resides not in his use of violence but in his work to prevent it.

Throughout his life, every time he disarms a man or confiscates a weapon, he discards it behind a dresser in his room, and ““this disposal was what he enjoyed most. It took away from all evil that he had done and felt”” (218). It is an active act of reparation, which has a concrete impact on the lives of the people in his community. After he dies, the cache of weapons is discovered, and the men who find it reflect, ““Think of all the things that were not done”” (272). In a novel which demonstrates that acts of violence almost always beget retaliatory violence, Merville's act to remove weapons from the fray is one of the only ways to break the cycle. He cannot stop the human propensity for violence any more than Harry Lintel can help or change Ada; he simply does what he can to prevent the fallen people from carrying out the worst aspects of their nature.

Gautreaux is interested in more than just the question of justifiable violence, though. While most of Gautreaux's characters do not ruminate over the theological arguments regarding peace and nonviolence in as explicit terms as Merville, the experiences of the Aldridge brothers, Randolph and Byron, in *The Clearing*, and Sam

³⁶ Gautreaux revisits this theme when Byron and Randolph debate whether or not the assassination of the Kaiser would have been a moral act even though, as Randolph says, ““It's wrong, By. It's a sin”” (183).

Simoneaux, in *The Missing*, reflect a developing engagement with war, suffering and nonviolence, one that reflects the nuanced Catholic position on these issues. In Gautreaux's later novels, those who experience violence are scarred, physically and emotionally, and Gautreaux's description of these scars calls into question any facile link between violence and the experience of grace.

In *The Clearing*, the trauma of World War I hangs over all of the action, and its effects are felt by both the protagonists and antagonists. Byron Aldridge returned from the war "neither elated nor somber but with the haunted expression of a poisoned dog, unable to touch anyone or speak for more than a few seconds without turning slowly to look over his shoulder. ...After France, Byron spoke to people with his eyes wide, sometimes vibrating with panic, as if he expected them to burst into flames" (11). Clearly suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress, Byron is unable to return to civilized life; he leaves his family and drifts around the country, eventually winding up in a lumber mill in Louisiana, where he works as a constable. Byron's father, a Pennsylvanian lumber merchant, purchases the mill and sends his younger son Randolph down to manage it and to reclaim his brother. The mill is an uncivilized place³⁷ where violence is ever-present, both in intra-camp feuds between the lumbermen and in the actions of the local mobsters who run the camp saloon. The leaders of the Mafia, Buzetti and Crouch, are ruthless, violent men, but Gautreaux indicates that they, like Byron, have been shaped by their experiences in the war. Buzetti saw three of his brothers bayoneted in one day (174), and

³⁷ Bauer draws a connection between Randolph's journey down to the mill and Marlowe's journey in *Heart of Darkness* (152).

Crouch was both tortured by his captors and forced to execute his fellow prisoners (269). Although Gautreaux does not use these traumatic events to entirely excuse the men's actions, he does indicate that their experience of violence and suffering has warped their sense of the value of human life, and the violence of the novel originates from this distorted sense of human dignity.

In contrast to these men who have been deformed by the war, Randolph stands as the emblem of detached civilization, and he is thus initially shocked and horrified by the casual violence of the Nimbus mill. He commands his brother to "Shoot to wound," not to kill, but when his brother points out that even though he values the precept "Thou shall not kill" the men he is trying to control do not, Randolph has no response (126, 123). Randolph has no solution to the moral complexity surrounding the use of violence, and is forced to admit, "I don't know. I just don't know" what the correct course of action is. After his friend dies a meaningless death as a result of a saloon fight, he tries to rationalize the loss, telling his lover, "I guess I was trying to find something redemptive in his death" (128), but there is no such redemption to be found.

Randolph is unable to remain above the violence of the world he inhabits. The novel turns on the question of whether violence is ever necessary, and demonstrates that even justifiable violence begets more violence. Randolph shoots and kills a Mafioso in an act of justifiable homicide, but even though Randolph had a legitimate reason to shoot the

man, the act changes him.³⁸ Immediately afterward, he boasts to another mobster, “Tell Buzetti I didn’t want to shoot his cousin...But let him know that if he makes more trouble for me I’ll make damned sure he never eats another meatball” (177). Byron, who has more experience of violence than Randolph, tells his brother, “I’ve seen this before...It’s how it all starts...With posturing. With one shot. ...What starts small gets bigger” (177). He is right, of course, as this shooting leads to retaliation by the mobsters, which initiates an ever-escalating cycle of violence that culminates in a chaotic shootout between the Aldridge brothers and their lumbermen and the members of the mob, which leaves Byron partially crippled and most of the mobsters dead. But even this violent confrontation does not end the cycle of violence, because Crouch, the one member of the mob who escapes from the shoot-out, returns to the mill camp where he murders a man, and then shoots Randolph and nearly murders his wife before being killed by Randolph’s housekeeper. Violence begets violence.

After the shootout, Randolph wonders “if he would be punished by God for shooting men, or if the killing itself was the punishment” (292), but in one of the novel’s few weak points, we, as readers, do not really participate in Randolph’s internal suffering over his own violent actions. He is conflicted over them, but within the logic of the novel they seem like the only possible actions for him to take, and they have almost universally positive results. Although all of the protagonists of the novel, including the children, suffer or are threatened with violence over the course of the story, in what is perhaps too

³⁸ In an interview with Margaret Bauer, Gautreaux articulated his position on how using violence alters the individual: “It just happens that everybody that gets involved in the business of shooting people with rifles winds up damaged and changed” (*Conversations* 138).

harmonious a conclusion they all manage to survive and flourish, and the novel ends on an uplifting note. Randolph has grown, and Byron has reconciled with his family. *The Clearing* demonstrates the endlessness of the cycle of violence and repeatedly condemns the use of violence as an easy solution to life's complexities, but in its larger arc it still hints that violence can, in fact, be redemptive. Both Byron and Randolph begin the novel as broken, incomplete men, and it is in the violent swamp of the Nimbus mill that both men learn to love and sacrifice for each other; there is a connection between their use of violence to end the threat of the Buzetti clan and the final triumphant reconciliation of all members of the Aldridge family. While I agree with Lamar Nisly that it is the "refusal to accept violence easily – on both the local and the international levels – as even a necessary evil in our fallen world that affirms *The Clearing's* Catholic sensibilities" ("Presbyterians" 114), I think the overall structure of the novel still unites violence and redemption in a way that the actions of the individual characters seem to want to resist.

In his most recent novel, *The Missing*, though, Gautreaux's depiction of both the use and effect of violence provides no such correlation. Repeatedly throughout the novel, it is only those who refrain from using violence who are redeemed. Gautreaux explains why this is so:

It was a delight to write *The Missing* because it goes against contemporary American culture, and against our worst nature. It goes against everything on American television, where cops and bad guys alike are blowing people apart with pistols and assault rifles every hour, on the hour. *The Missing* goes against almost everything Hollywood teaches... *The Missing* builds toward the expectation of a big shootout. When it didn't happen, I know some readers were disappointed. I expected this from day one. Americans have been programmed to a template of offense followed by justified violence. This is a cliché, and a simpl-minded notion. (*Conversations* 160)

Instead of following the Hollywood formulation, which is in large measure the widely accepted American notion of how violence should and does function, Gautreaux follows the Catholic teaching on the use of violence,³⁹ dramatizing that the only way to end the cycle of violence is to cease repaying violence in kind. Marshall Merville's act of removing weapons from environment and thereby deescalating the cycle of violence is carried forward in Sam Simoneaux's decision not to use force against the Cloat clan, who murdered his family when he was only an infant.

The Missing, like *The Clearing*, is a little too systematic in its ideological positioning, since Gautreaux uses both dominant plot lines in the novel – Sam's search for Lily Weller, a little girl who was kidnapped from the store where he was working as a sort of security guard, and his quest for some measure of closure with the murder of his family – to reinforce the notion that all forms of violence are ultimately destructive.⁴⁰ The novel is not a polemic screed against all forms of violence, but Gautreaux does perhaps overemphasize his theme. Time after time, those who take up arms are destroyed, and those who refrain from doing so are redeemed. The diverse set of encounters between the Skadlocks, who kidnapped Lily, and those who seek to get her back illustrates this

³⁹ Once again, Lamar Nisly, in "Tim Gautreaux's *The Missing*: Journeys of Vengeance or Belonging?", does an admirable job of identifying how Gautreaux's work portrays a Catholic perspective on violence, drawing on the U.S. Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, to persuasively demonstrate how the themes of *The Missing* reflect Catholic social teaching.

⁴⁰ Even Sam's backstory in World War I reiterates the condemnation of war and violence found in *The Clearing*. Although Sam misses active duty, his experience of its after-effects changes him: "He looked out and saw half a million soldiers going at each other in a freezing rain, their bodies shredded by artillery, their faces torn off, their knees disintegrated into snowy red pulp, their lungs boiled out by poison gas, and all of this for four years, spread out as far and wide as the continent itself" (11). Sam's exposure to the chaotic violence of the war contributes to his pacifistic stance: "After his experience in the war, he wanted nothing further to do with guns" (37).

pattern. Sam first finds the Skadlocks after they have sold Lily, and it is only because he approaches them unarmed that he is allowed to leave their compound alive. Lily's father, Ted, approaches them armed with "his knife and pistol" (114), and he ends up being mauled by their dog; he eventually dies from these wounds. Lily's brother August then seeks them out to avenge his father; Sam follows to dissuade him. Sam offers a long list of reason that August's quest for revenge is misguided: he almost surely will be killed before he is able to carry out his act of revenge, and even if he is not, any act of revenge will simply start another cycle of violence, in which more Skadlock relatives will come to avenge themselves upon August and his family. Sam counsils August to let divine justice take its course: "down the line, when he does die, he'll have to pay up then. I don't know what will happen, exactly, but it probably ain't good" (257). Sam's rhetoric persuades the boy not to shoot, and this act of restraint is immediately repaid when the first person who steps out of the Skadlock house, the person August would have shot, is his own sister Lily.

But the Skadlock story is really only a precursor of the central confrontation of the novel, between Sam and the Cloat clan. Throughout the novel, Sam is told that he must seek revenge as a matter of justice and manliness, and that failure to do so makes him a coward and an unfaithful son. August tells him, "Sam Simoneaux, you're just a coward with all sorts of excuses" (253), and Sam's bunkmate Charlie repeatedly calls him a coward, "a little pudding", and "chickenshit" for not taking revenge (159-60). In Charlie's eyes, taking vengeance is the only form of justice for what happened to his family and, in an echo of the moral dilemma of preventative violence posed by *The*

Clearing, Sam's vengeance will also remove the danger of the Cloat menace from the world: "Kill a snake, and the next man on the trail won't get bit" (160). Against this rhetoric of retaliatory violence, Gautreaux positions Sam's uncle Claude, who offers a Catholic perspective on the situation, telling Sam, "It's what the priest says, Sam. Sin is its own punishment. They got to live with what they did...Baby, what they did is who they are. It makes them cripples. Half-people" (183). Sam listens to his uncle, but he still feels the necessity of confronting the Cloats, if not to extract revenge then to at least gain some sense of closure. The readers, too, desire to see this confrontation, and we expect to see the Cloats get what they deserve. As Nisly points out, Gautreaux humanizes the Skadlocks, but the Cloats are depicted as essentially subhuman, and since "The novel sets up the Cloats clan...as the personifications of evil, people without any redeeming qualities...the reader is primed for a glorious scene of redemptive violence when Sam confronts the killers of his family" ("Vengeance" 203).

When Sam does finally confront the Cloats, though, we do not get the showdown we have been expecting. Gautreaux subverts our expectations, just as Percy did with the non-apocalypse in *Love in the Ruins*, because this denial of what we have been prepared for leads the reader to reflect on what did *not* happen.⁴¹ When we do not get the ending that we have been led to expect, we ask why, and this lingering question ultimately leads us back to Claude's position, that a life of violence extracts its own payment. The Cloats embody this precept, perhaps too perfectly. Their once large clan has been reduced to

⁴¹ It is in this way that Gautreaux subverts what Walter Wink calls the "Myth of Redemptive Violence"; see above, Chapter One, page 24.

only three ruined remaining members; as Sam questions them about what has happened to their family, we learn that they have been decimated both by revenge killings and disease brought about by their unclean way of living. Sam's final reflection on the "mystery" of the Cloats is that "the worst thing that ever happened to them was each other" (361). Their final, depraved way of life is the inverse of the community that Gautreaux's Catholic fiction champions.

Both Bauer and Nisly draw attention to the fact that since the Cloats are already suffering and close to death, Sam's extracting violent revenge is unnecessary; instead, Sam's interrogation of the remaining Cloats is a more effective punishment for them. By forcing Molton, the surviving Cloat patriarch, to relive his crimes, Sam initiates a visceral response; the man's "eyes blinked and watered with the pain of retelling" (356). Although Molton maintains there is no eternal judgment, Sam's insistence that, "One way or the other, when you die, there's always something to find out" is the final message of the chapter (357). But the novel indicates that this post death judgment is not the only way people like the Cloats pay for their actions; by depicting them living out their final years in fetid squalor, Gautreaux condemns them to a form of death in life. In what is perhaps too neat a conclusion, the Cloats have truly reaped what they have sowed. In fact, I think Gautreaux stacks the deck in favor of his moral vision; a more nuanced denouement, in which Sam is actually in danger and his opponents are not totally debilitated before he meets them, would call for a more complex ethical decision vis-à-vis the use of violence. If they had threatened Sam, would he have used violence to

defend himself, or to extract revenge? It is perhaps too simplistic to depict those who live a life of violence as being so utterly decimated by this lifestyle.

But while I do think that Gautreaux might provide too simplistic a conclusion to the moral dilemmas raised in his novel, his depiction of nonviolence as the most moral and virtuous course of action certainly challenges widespread cultural assumptions, and his replacement of the myth of redemptive violence with the nuanced Catholic vision of ethical restraint adds a compelling and necessary voice to the discussion surrounding the use of violence. His two most recent novels demonstrate Catholicism's counter-cultural positions on issues beyond the normal flashpoints of the American culture-wars (such as abortion and same sex marriage). Gautreaux's work draws on Catholic social teaching to question the values inherent in contemporary American culture, and to provide an alternative way of thinking about how to think and act morally. As Claude tells Sam, "What you do will say who you are" (314). In his novels and his stories, Gautreaux uses this emphasis on one's deeds, which has its roots in his experience of Catholicism, to challenge his readers to think about questions of morality that they might not otherwise encounter. He uses the fictional tools of his literary predecessors, particularly the emphasis upon violence, to shift the emphasis of the Catholic novel from questions of existential meaning to questions of moral action, and in so doing he keeps the Catholic novel alive and vital as a form of cultural discourse.

CHAPTER FOUR

BELIEF AND AMBIGUITY IN CONTEMPORARY CATHOLIC LITERATURE:

ALICE MCDERMOTT, ANNIE DILLARD AND THE *MEMENTO MORI*

In a recent essay in *The New York Times Sunday Book Review*, Paul Elie poses the question, “Where has the novel of belief gone?” He answers his own question by stating, “writers with Christian preoccupations...[are] writing fiction in which belief acts obscurely and inconclusively.” Elie seems to think that there is something disingenuous about this depiction of belief, that perhaps writers who are Christian believers are deliberately withholding some insight or knowledge from their readers. He is frustrated because when one reads contemporary writers, “their beliefs remain a mystery,” something he contrasts with the work of writers like “Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Reynolds Price and John Updike” who “presented themselves as novelists with... ‘Christian convictions.’” While Elie perhaps overstates the clarity of religious belief found in the works of these earlier writers, his lament with regard to contemporary writers – “I just don’t know what they believe or how they came to believe it” – strikes me as particularly misguided. He wants a contemporary Christian literature in which “the writers put it all together,” and where the writers stop “refus[ing] to grant belief any explanatory power.” Elie states that modern belief can only be “understood [when] serious writers have their say,” but “serious writers” of many different faith traditions have had their say, and what they say is that although Elie may long for a literary

depiction of belief as whole, unified, and clear, belief, as it is often experienced in the contemporary world, is partial, fragmented, and ambiguous. In contemporary literature that makes any mention of the possibility of belief, the decision of whether or not to believe is but one more choice amidst many decisions that individuals must make, one that can provide some measure of comfort, solace, or insight, but one that falls short of “putting it all together” (Elie).

The state of contemporary literature of belief is well covered in both John McClure’s *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007) and Amy Hungerford’s *Postmodern Belief: American Literature and Religion since 1960* (2010), both of which discuss the partialness of contemporary faith and the ambiguities of modern belief. What I seek to do in this chapter is examine the depiction of belief within the work of contemporary Catholic writers, which is an area not covered by either McClure or Hungerford, neither of whom discuss any writers who self-identify as practicing Catholics.¹ No contemporary Catholic writer writes about belief in the manner that Elie is seeking; although they may seek to, in Elie’s words, “understand ourselves and our place on earth,” none depicts faith as providing definitive answers to life’s mysteries. Even a writer like Ron Hansen, who, as an ordained deacon in the Catholic Church, comes as close as any contemporary writer to the clarity of religious belief found in the letters of Flannery O’Connor, still writes fiction that presents a religious vision that remains deeply ambiguous. *Mariette in Ecstasy* (1991), his novel

¹ Hungerford discusses the work of Don DeLillo, who was raised Catholic, and whose experience of Catholicism was clearly an important influence on his writing, but DeLillo has not been a practicing Catholic as an adult.

about a young nun who receives the stigmata, contains some of the most beautiful and sincere depictions of the miraculous in American literature, and Mariette's reflections on the love and presence of God in her life speak to the kind of wholeness and clarity that Elie is asking for, but the entire novel is wrapped in a layer of ambiguity because Hansen does not indicate whether Mariette's experience of the stigmata is authentic or not.² The reader is given the choice of whether or not to believe. This is the state of modern belief; it involves a process of discernment, and even choosing to believe does not necessarily bring solace or surety. Mariette is ultimately asked to leave her convent community, and lives out her days alone. In contemporary society, the experience of God can be comforting and isolating at the same time.

Paul Elie wants to find "the writer who can dramatize belief the way it feels in your experience, at once a fact on the ground and a sponsor of the uncanny, an account of our predicament that still and all has the old power to persuade." The strongest contemporary literature of belief is that which depicts belief as it is actually experienced, though, not as we might wish for it to be. Contemporary Catholic literature is concerned with Elie's process of dramatizing the experience of belief, but it does so by reflecting the contemporary predicament, which is that religious faith in the postmodern world does not have the old power to persuade. It may still have power, but it is certainly not the old power; in contemporary literature, belief in God can disrupt an individual's sense of

² It is of note that Hansen sets his most explicitly Christian novel in the early 1900s, when a culture of belief was more widespread. This is why, for the characters in the novel, the question of Mariette's stigmata is not a referendum on the possibility of such miraculous things happening at all, but rather a question about why this happens to Mariette in particular. Hansen's novel thus engages with questions of faith on a variety of levels, probing the conflict between personal sanctity and the demands of the community (which is central to the characters within the novel) as well as the broader question of the possibility of miraculous interventions (a fundamental question for the modern reader).

surety, and awaken her to new ways of seeing the world, but it does not impose a definitive narrative of clarity and meaning on existence.

Alice McDermott and Annie Dillard both use their fiction to explore the contemporary experience of belief, and while their works manifest a sense of the divine presence in the world, there is no sense that this presence brings clarity and security. Both writers use the lens of human mortality as the focal point of their exploration of what it means to believe in the modern age. In the previous chapters, I have been focusing on writers whose Catholic faith led them to write fiction structured in a way designed to lead the reader to question his or her conception of the divine, and to focus his or her attention on obstacles, such as pride, scientism, and the modern malaise, which prevent humanity from being aware of the possibility of transcendence, but there is a concurrent theme at work in the Catholic literary tradition. By this point in this study, it is apparent that Catholic authors use not only violence, but specifically the reality of mortality, as a key component in the structure of their fictions. Catholic writers are not primarily interested in identifying or addressing the social forces that contribute to the violent deaths that permeate their fictions; they may be interested in this social dimension, but their primary focus is on how the individual responds to the awareness of his or her own mortality. There is a long tradition in the Catholic arts of the *memento mori* – the presence of the skull in the midst of a still-life, for instance – which serves as a reminder that even in the midst of life we are all inevitably going to die. The tradition of the *memento mori* is tied to the long-standing practice of the Catholic Church admonishing its adherents to focus

on the “four last things” – Death, Judgment, Heaven and Hell.³ In short, both the Catholic faith itself and the artistic expressions put forth by artists exposed to the Catholic faith have traditionally been shaped by the contemplation of one’s mortality.

Although contemporary American society is often accused of trying to hide the reality of death and dying from itself,⁴ the contemporary Catholic literary imagination remains inspired by contemplation of mortality. As my readings of O’Connor, Percy and Gautreaux highlight, these authors write fictions in which a brush with one’s own impending death changes the protagonist (and, potentially, the reader), leading him/her to deeper insights about the meaning of one’s life. Many of the classics of twentieth century Catholic fiction function as a *memento mori*, taking the idea that contemplation of death is a productive task. Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead, Revisited*, Francois Mauriac’s *Viper’s Tangle*, Muriel Spark’s *Memento Mori*, or any number of Graham Greene’s novels take the idea of a deathbed conversion, or at least a change of perspective which results from the encounter with death, quite seriously. Consider, for example, one of the recurring lines from Greene’s *Brighton Rock*: “Between the stirrup and the ground, he something sought and something found” (91), which refers to the possibility for repentance and acceptance of God’s mercy even in the split second between when one falls from a horse’s back and when one hits the ground. Greene’s protagonist Pinkie repeatedly mulls

³ See, for instance, “Eschatology” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*.

⁴ Jeffrey Johnson, in “Denial: The American Way of Death,” draws on a number of sociological and historical sources to make the case that “generally speaking, the American attitude [towards death] is one of avoidance,” and that this avoidance is facilitated by the growth of the funeral home and health care industries, which have largely hidden the processes of terminal sickness and death from the immediate, personal sphere. Catholic literature, in its focused depictions on the processes of death and dying, reintroduces these realities to the consciousness of its readers.

over this line, wondering if there will be time for him to turn away from his wickedness at the last moment; Greene indicates that such a thing as a last second conversion is possible. But while the fictions of Greene, Waugh, Mauriac and O'Connor are clearly interested in the eternal states of their characters souls, I contend that in contemporary Catholic literature the emphasis has shifted towards an exploration of how contemplation of one's mortality changes the individual's actions in the here and now. Catholic literature still maintains an emphasis on mortality, but now its primary focus is on the ways in which acknowledging one's mortality affects interpersonal relationships, rather than the individual's relationship to the divine. Throughout the continuum of Catholic literature, though, Catholic artists continue to draw upon the tradition of the *memento mori* in order to lead their readers to a place of reflection.

Mortality is a central concern in the fiction of both Alice McDermott and Annie Dillard, both of whom prioritize the effects of one's awareness of mortality on one's thoughts and actions rather than on the eternal state of one's soul. For McDermott and Dillard, consciousness of mortality is tied to the questions of what to believe and how to live these beliefs, and in this respect they reaffirm Amy Hungerford's claims regarding the connections between belief and practice for writers who hold religious commitments. In *Postmodern Belief*, her study of the contemporary American religious imagination, Hungerford draws attention to ways in which scholars of religious studies distinguish between belief and practice, prioritizing the study of religious practice while marginalizing, if not completely dismissing, the concept of studying belief. These scholars contend that a focus on belief is inadequate because it oversimplifies "the

messiness of religious practice, cannot tolerate internal contradiction, and lacks the capaciousness to speak to the diversity of religious life in America” (109). Instead of trying to identify the specific content of one’s beliefs, they believe “the better question...is about what you do: Have you been to mass? Have you ever prayed to St. Jude? Are you observant? Do you talk ‘Jewish’?” (109).

Hungerford points out the shortcomings of such an approach, noting that while the scholar of contemporary religion has an obligation to attempt to understand the practice of lived religion, doing this without acknowledging the beliefs that underlie these practices results in an incomplete picture of contemporary religious life: “The decisive shift of interest from belief to practice, and, in general, the shift away from interest in religious meanings in favor of thick description of efforts to track the workings of power, assumes already a secular point of view that must be different from a religious point of view, because the latter remains invested in knowing itself as such in its own terms” (111). Hungerford contends that, “the Christian practitioner in America...cannot live religiously without on occasion trying to articulate that knowledge...Articulating the knowledge is part of the practice” (112). When we read contemporary Catholic literature we find writers who articulate a vision of lived belief as experienced in the contemporary moment; their characters’ struggles over what to believe and how to act on these beliefs reflect the struggles of belief in the modern age. While both McDermott and Dillard have written about, and discussed in interviews, the importance of their faith in the creation of their art, neither is overly invested in a strictly credal explanation of what they believe, or why they believe it, and this ambiguity is at the heart of contemporary Catholic

literature. By creating literature that manifests an (at times) inchoate faith, but one that is nevertheless faith-filled and recognizably Catholic, they are uniting the strands of belief and practice in a way that is distinctly contemporary.

Hungerford notes that for most of the authors she studies the content of such belief is almost surely not doctrinal, or even necessarily significant: “belief remains at the heart of American popular discourse about religion,” but “the content of belief does not matter to many traditional believers” (112). While Hungerford’s claims about belief and practice are applicable to contemporary Catholic writers, most of whom do not write particularly orthodox fictions, the content of belief manifested within Catholic fiction does still matter a great deal. As I will show, what McDermott’s and Dillard’s characters believe about their own mortality, and their relationship to God, is an essential aspect of how they live in the world; often, their beliefs are inseparable from their actions.⁵ By choosing to focus on ways in which contemporary Catholic writers use modernized versions of the *memento mori* tradition to clarify what their characters believe about God and faith, and how these beliefs affect their actions, I will show how the Catholic imagination continues to manifest an integrated approach to belief and practice. Often, this integration appears in contemporary Catholic fiction as an emphasis on *orthopraxis*,

⁵ In her discussion of the work of Marilyn Robinson, Hungerford indicates that Robinson’s novels demonstrate “that ordinary people have rich complicated interior lives... a silent discourse of thought that, if we knew its voice, would astonish us”, and that this is a reflection of “the Protestant understanding of inner life” (114). In Hungerford’s view, the Protestant imagination links “religious discourse and religious life” (114); I contend that the Catholic imagination finds aspects of the religious in all facets of discourse and lived experience. In a Catholic novel the focus does not need to explicitly be on God or religious experience in order to serve as a reflection on faith or grace.

or correct action, over dogma and creeds.⁶ While characters may not be deeply invested in a system of belief, they struggle to act in a just manner toward those around them, and this serves as a demonstration of their faith. We will see this particularly in the work of Annie Dillard, but I begin with an examination of McDermott's novels, because her work, too, repeatedly dwells on the connection between belief and practice, in ways that are often overlooked. Many of her Catholic characters know exactly what they believe about God, salvation, heaven and hell; at the same time, these beliefs are not necessarily adequate for dealing with the ambiguities and tensions of modern life, and this potential inadequacy of faith is an essential aspect of contemporary religious belief.

Alice McDermott's Fiction: Telling Stories in the Face of Death

I need to note from the start that there is some debate about just how Catholic Alice McDermott's fiction really is.⁷ While her work is often included in anthologies of Catholic writers, and discussed in relation to the Catholic literary tradition, Paul Giles does not mention her in his work, she is not included in Mary R. Reichardt's *Catholic Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook*, and Ross Labrie dismisses her as a Catholic author, saying she writes about "Catholicism...with historical detachment rather

⁶ Orthopraxis became a central term in Catholic theology beginning in the late 1960s, stemming from the growth of liberation theology in Latin American and political theology in Europe, which emphasized the concept that right practice leads to right belief. See Gustavo Gutierrez's seminal work *A Theology of Liberation* (1971). For an examination of the significance of orthopraxis on the Catholic literary imagination, see Mark Bosco's *Graham Greene's Catholic Imagination* (2005), in which Bosco demonstrates how "the religious sense in [Greene's] novels after the [Second Vatican] council grows from merely orthodox considerations of a character's personal salvation to a reflection on *orthopraxis*, the right practice of a character's service to others as a manifestation of religious faith in whatever expression one is able to render it" (106).

⁷ This is true of many contemporary Catholic writers (including Annie Dillard, as we shall soon see), which perhaps says more about the nature of contemporary Catholic identity than about any specific author's Catholic *bona fides*.

than through the eyes of faith” (277). There is an element of truth to this claim; McDermott is certainly not interested in exploring the mysteries of transcendence and immanence in the same ways that O’Connor and Percy do; she acknowledges that the Catholic nature of her fiction is not in any way doctrinal, writing, “As a fiction writer, I am not interested in conversion, transubstantiation, the mystical body of Christ, the infallibility of the pope, Aquinas, or Augustine” (“Lunatic”). Her work is nevertheless worth considering as Catholic for a number of reasons. It would be hard to identify another writer who has so ably depicted the cultural practices of mid-century Irish-American Catholics, or the ways in which these practices provide an organizing structural unity in the lives of the faithful.⁸ David Anderson, in *Religion and Ethics Weekly*, succinctly makes the case for McDermott as a Catholic novelist, calling her “body of work...one of the most insightful and accurate sociological portraits of Catholicism in the second half of the 20th century...[and] an eloquent, even exquisite...witness to the perseverance and also transformation of the faith in the lives of ordinary families.” Anderson’s assessment is not unique; Robert Lauder has called McDermott a “closet transcendental Thomist,” one who “sees creation as sacramental...In McDermott’s novels God is the horizon toward which the characters are oriented, the atmosphere that surrounds them, the love in which they exist and move and have their being. Because God is present in every human experience, even sin, it is easy to overlook that presence.”

⁸ For more on the Irish Catholic cultural elements in McDermott’s work, see Patricia Coughlan, “Paper Ghosts: Reading the Uncanny in Alice McDermott”; Sinéad Moynihan, “‘None of us will always be here’: Whiteness, Loss and Alice McDermott’s *At Weddings and Wakes*”; and Mary Paniccia Carden, “Making Love, Making History: (Anti) Romance in Alice McDermott’s *At Weddings and Wakes* and *Charming Billy*.”

Patricia Schnapp, in her essay “Shades of Redemption in Alice McDermott’s Novels,” explores McDermott’s entire body of work and concludes that McDermott’s “essentially Catholic vision” is manifest in both the themes she chooses to write about – “suffering, forgiveness, hope, belief, charity, sin and redemption” – and in her treatment of these themes (19).

McDermott herself often raises the significance of her Catholicism when discussing her work. She has claimed that Catholicism “is a mad, rebellious faith, one that flies in the face of all reason, all evidence, all sensible injunctions to be comforted, to be comfortable. A faith that rejects every timid impulse to accept the fact that life goes on pleasantly enough despite all that vanishes, despite death itself” (“Lunatic”). She goes on to claim that being Catholic is, “a mad, stubborn, outrageous, nonsensical refusal to be comforted by anything less than the glorious impossible of the resurrection of the body and life everlasting” (“Lunatic”, sic). Her fiction is often animated by this tension – she repeatedly writes about death, but her focus is not primarily on the characters who die, but rather on how those who survive try to make sense of death, both of those who have died but also of their own impending deaths. Her novels pose, both implicitly and explicitly, the question of what, if anything, is an adequate response to the fact of one’s inevitable mortality. McDermott offers two possible solutions, art and faith, neither of which is shown to be entirely up to the task.

Perhaps surprisingly, McDermott’s characters, although they are almost universally Catholic, do not display much in the way of the “mad” faith that she claims defines her own Catholicism. Her characters, particularly her narrators, do not strike us as

unreasonable, although they do manifest the sensibility that McDermott claims undergirds the Catholic faith – they refuse to accept loss and death easily. Her narrators, when faced with the very real possibility that life might itself be meaningless, construct narratives of belief that assert order within existence, and yet neither they nor those who hear their stories are particularly comforted by them. They hold out hope that there is something more than narrative that can be offered to ameliorate their pain and fear.

Child of My Heart (2002) is McDermott's most focused depiction of an individual's attempt to use narrative to hold death at bay,⁹ but the novel demonstrates that although this desire is understandable it is ultimately both childish and fruitless. The novel is structured as the adult narrator Theresa's remembrance of an idealized summer, and although the novel is littered with traumatic events, including the statutory rape of Theresa by the artist whose child she babysits, a number of marital infidelities, divorces, neglected children, and the impending death of Theresa's cousin Daisy, who is suffering from undiagnosed leukemia, Theresa's narrative of the summer manages to minimize these traumas. The entire novel functions as the grown-up Theresa's continued attempt to keep death at bay through assertion of story; even though she, as an adult, realizes the implications of her cousin's sickness, as well as the pervasiveness of pain in the lives of the people around her fifteen year-old self, she refuses to let this trauma overtake her story. Within the narrative, her fifteen year-old self acknowledges the presence of death but she refuses to grant it any permanent power. Although intimations of mortality

⁹ McDermott told Charlie Reilly that this was the guiding principle for her narrative technique; the entire novel functions as Theresa's attempt to "stop time. This is how she takes a stand against those songs about the deaths of children. This is how she banishes the world in which children die. She writes this story" (Reilly 565).

repeatedly bubble up in the novel, from the graphic death of the neighborhood cat, to Theresa's claim that she remembers meeting her dead brother in heaven before being born, to Theresa's uncle's story about a ghost father and son who inhabit the attic, the youthful Theresa repeatedly transforms these tragic events into magical stories. In one early example, Theresa spins a story about a couple who honor the memory of their dead son by creating a lollipop-filled tree in their front yard (10-11). When faced with the profusion of death, both literal and in artistic form, Theresa thinks, "I wanted them banished, the stories, the songs, the foolish tales...I wanted them scribbled over, torn up. Start over. Draw a world where it simply doesn't happen, a world of only color, no form" (180). Theresa seeks a world where "all dark things [are] banished, age, cruelty, pain, poor dogs, dead cats...all the coming griefs, all the sentimental, maudlin tales fashioned out of the death of children" are forbidden (180).

She attempts to use her own stories to fashion this world without pain and death, but while these stories provide transitory relief, they are ultimately powerless. They cannot stave off the inevitability of Daisy's death any more than Theresa's blind refusal to accept the number of signs that point toward her illness. The reader knows that Daisy is going to die even as Theresa refuses to see or acknowledge it. Although Michiko Kakutani identifies "Theresa's failure to get her cousin to a doctor" as one of the more "bizarre aspects of her behavior," I see this not as bizarre but as a very real and human flaw on the part of Theresa. McDermott purposefully makes the reader aware of Daisy's condition even as the youthful Theresa, and her grown-up counterpart, refuse to recognize it, so that we ultimately come to view Theresa's refusal to acknowledge reality

as a mistake – a foolish, dangerous one, but also a very human one. In McDermott’s view, we are all in some way Theresa; we refuse to acknowledge our own mortality, and the mortality of our loved ones, so we spin stories that minimize death, or that transform it into something manageable. We do not want to contemplate the *memento mori* in our midst, so we pretend that they are not there. McDermott indicates that this is understandable when we are children, like the fifteen-year old Theresa, but that when we continue to hold onto these narratives into adulthood, like the now grown Theresa who recounts this narrative, then we are holding on to a mistaken view of existence.

Child of My Heart indicates that we cannot use our stories to rob death of its power, but McDermott’s National Book Award winning *Charming Billy* (1998) takes a different approach to the relationship between narrative and death. McDermott uses this novel to see if we can use narrative, not to ignore death, but to explore it and to try to make sense of it. For McDermott, control of one’s narrative is a synecdoche for faith in general, so her exploration of the ways in which narrative responds to mortality is also an exploration of the adequacy of faith to deal with death. She indicates that a faith that refuses to acknowledge death is essentially meaningless, whereas a faith that faces death and attempts to make some sense of it has value. McDermott makes this connection between narrative and faith explicit in an interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, stating, “It seemed to me if you’re telling a story about faith, you’re also telling a story about telling stories, the things that we believe in – our stories that we hear and are told.” She goes on to describe her work as being “ultimately...about faith, about what we believe in, and, above all, what we *choose* to believe in” (Farnsworth, emphasis added). McDermott’s

prioritizing of the choice involved in this process is central to her conceptions of faith in the modern world. While McDermott illustrates that many moderns cannot simply accept an understanding of existence handed down by fiat, her fiction also acknowledges that what we believe about our lives and our place in the world determines the way we carry out our lives. Our belief system structures our lived experience; the two are inextricably linked.

McDermott, like the Catholic writers before her, structures much of her fiction around death and suffering because she knows that how an individual chooses to make sense of these difficult yet inescapable elements of life goes a long way towards defining both what one values and how one acts. Her fiction often contains scenes of suffering and violence because she focuses her imagination upon scenarios in which her characters are forced to choose how to make sense of these moments, and what they choose to believe about these questions in a very real way defines who they are and how they live. Although this dynamic is present in almost all of her novels,¹⁰ her treatment of this theme is most masterfully handled in *Charming Billy*. The novel centers on the family of Billy Lynch as they attempt to come to grips with his death from alcoholism, but it is fundamentally about the power of the stories we tell and are told. The novel is structured as a long monologue delivered by the narrator, Glory, to her husband, and it is a record of Glory's attempt to inhabit and re-imagine the various stories that she has inherited from

¹⁰ In addition to the significance of this dynamic in *Child of My Heart*, discussed above, consider the central importance of the way the community remembers and relives the violent showdown between the young hoods and the suburban fathers in *That Night* (1987), or the various characters attempts to make sense of May's death in *At Weddings and Wakes* (1992), or in the ways the Keane family members react to the death of Jacob in the Vietnam War in *After This* (2006).

her father's generation in order to construct a coherent account of where her family has come from, and, by extension, who she herself is and where she might be going.

Storytelling is an integral part of the Irish imagination, and the novel is filled with various stories and reminiscences recounted by the mostly male members of the older generation during the wake of the narrator's uncle, Billy. Through these stories, Billy's family attempts to make sense of his life and his gruesome death; they want to impose a narrative upon his death that will give them some sense of closure. Billy was an alcoholic, and certain members of his family, particularly his cousin Dan Lynch, would like to fashion a romantic tragedy out of his life. The elements of romantic tragedy are present – the death of a young lover (Eva), followed by the downward spiral of alcoholism. This is the narrative arc the readers initially believe, but Glory undermines this familiar, mawkish story by revealing that Eva did not actually die, she simply took Billy's money and returned to Ireland. Billy's cousin Dennis, Glory's father, invented the story about Eva's death to save Billy's pride, and the power of this romantic narrative was so persuasive to Billy that he allowed it to shape the course of his life. He embraced the maudlin role of doomed lover, and like the hero of so many tragic love stories he turned to alcohol as a form of solace. The novel then becomes not one more tragic love story, but rather a meditation on how susceptible individuals are to the power of narrative.

Glory does not reveal much about herself, but the little she does say indicates how she was shaped by a desire to resist the dominant narrative of the Irish Catholic girl: "take a look at an unmarried Irishwoman's attachment to her old dad if you want to see

something truly ferocious. It was, I suppose, the very image I'd fought against myself, in the years after my own mother died, when I went off to Canisius instead of staying home" (132). She rejects the model of submissive femininity, but ends up inhabiting another traditional Irish Catholic identity: the role of family storyteller. What is significant about this role for the narrator, though, is the way that she re-imagines the stories she hears. She does not simply recount other's versions of the stories, she tells them as if she herself was present. She reveals other characters' thoughts and emotions in situations that she would have no legitimate access to; her role as storyteller frees her to tell not only her own story, but everyone else's as well. This appropriation of others' stories is an example of self-consciously imaginative narrative power. McDermott indicates that every individual's worldview is formed by the stories that we allow others to tell us or that we tell ourselves, and she asks us to pay attention to the stories that we allow to form us. The careful reader of a McDermott story knows that the story we are hearing is just one more recreation of the past, and that while it is engaging, nothing about it requires our submission to its vision of events or outcomes. Just as we realize that Billy was mistaken in his submission to the tragic-romantic view of his own life, we know that the significance of Glory's story is not authoritative but creative. The narratives we tell and are told are important, but as Glory acknowledges, no story, "when you came right down to it, was unbreakable, unchangeable" (222). This freedom from the authority of narrative can be liberating or terrifying – the characters in the novel who realize that this creative power is available to them struggle with the concept of God and the afterlife, recognizing that these might simply be more stories that we tell ourselves.

Since, for McDermott, narrative and faith are inextricably linked, acknowledging that all narratives can be reshaped, or discarded, is tantamount to accepting that faith is itself essentially a choice, and as such, it holds no claim to objective truth.

The novel ends with Glory taking on this existential dread. What are we left with if we cannot trust the literal truth of the narratives we inherit and pass on? Glory acknowledges that we cannot tell the difference between “what was actual, as opposed to what was imagined, as opposed to what was believed” but she goes on to assert that these distinctions do not make “any difference at all” (243). The novel ends with an assertion of the power and significance of storytelling and, by extension, of belief, but the entire novel has demonstrated that an important aspect, perhaps the most important aspect, of these stories is the ability to place oneself into them, and to become a co-creator in the process. McDermott supplies an important corrective to views of narrative that are hierarchical and require submission to the stories being told, which is ultimately reflective of the pre-Vatican II conception of belief. In her fiction, anyone can become the storyteller, and thus can reshape the contours of his or her own narrative.

In this sense, then, her work can be read as a commentary on the practice of belief itself. What we believe is a matter of deciding what stories to accept, and which to reject. But if McDermott believes the claim of her narrator that there is no difference between what was actual, imagined or believed, does this not place her in line with those other contemporary writers, discussed by Hungerford, who embrace an essentially contentless belief? Does McDermott’s assertion of power and control over what and why to believe

undermine the Catholicity of her work? Or, in other words, is McDermott's implicit assertion that autonomy is more important than obedience necessarily un-Catholic?

The Catholic literary tradition, stretching back at least to Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* (1920), provides a lengthy record of evidence that Catholic literature is more invested in posing questions than asserting dogma; throughout the twentieth century, Catholic literary works repeatedly demonstrate that blind acceptance of what seems incorrect or unreasonable is worse than questioning and doubting. McDermott's fiction does not shy away from the troubling questions, but she does not give doubt the final word, either. One does not get the sense, reading McDermott, that she knows something, or believes something, that she is not telling us, as we do when we read Percy. Percy used his fiction to initiate a search on the part of the reader because he believed this would lead the reader, as it led him, to God and the Catholic Church. McDermott, though, seems to pose the questions because they are deeply troubling to her and she has no definitive answers, but she seems to believe that answers, grounded in faith, are still possible.

Her characters have chosen to accept the tenets of Catholicism, but still their Catholic faith is shown to be inadequate to fully deal with the problems of mortality and suffering. As Glory says of her family: "All their hopes, in the end, their pairings and procreation and their keeping in touch, keeping track, futile in the end, failing in the end to keep them from seeing that nothing they felt, in the end, has made any difference" (212). Her repeated use of "in the end" foregrounds the mortality that everyone must ultimately face; all of the narratives of the novel circle around this fact, that everyone is

going to eventually die, so her narrator, characters, and readers are all forced to contemplate the significance of one's life. Immediately after this passage, Glory's father claims that his feelings of despair were "only a brief loss of faith," and that once again he "believe[s] everything now" (212). Glory, and the reader, remain unconvinced, knowing that "there was no way of telling if he lied" (212). The question posed by the novel is an essential one for the believer: Is faith an adequate response to the fact of one's inevitable death? McDermott's answer is an equivocal 'perhaps.'

McDermott's fiction does indicate that there is something, beyond the power of the stories we tell ourselves, that can offer solace in the face of death – religious, specifically Catholic, ritual. During the central set-piece of *Charming Billy*, when the family is holding the wake, Billy's wife Maeve is overcome with grief and despair and laments to the priest, "It's a terrible thing, Father...to come this far in life only to find that nothing you've felt has made any difference" (154).¹¹ While McDermott does not offer a definitive counter-narrative of faith that will assure Maeve that her feelings have essential worth, she does give Maeve the presence of the priest, whose authority allows the mourners to turn over their grief and despair to someone else. Glory states that once the priest arrives, "We all felt it, felt the tremendous relief that we finally had among us someone who knew what he was doing" (151). The priest speaks "with an authority that superseded all our experience of Billy" (152-53), and, for the moment, the mourners are

¹¹ It is significant that this passage, like Glory's meditation on "the end," draws attention not to actions but to feelings; one might expect the passage to read 'nothing you've *done*' not 'nothing you've *felt*,' but McDermott's focus is on subjectivity, because how one feels about life and the world, whether this be despair, anger, or love, drives both one's beliefs and one's actions. What Maeve is claiming in her despair is that her interior disposition, which is the motivating factor for everything else in her life and defines who she is as an individual, is essentially meaningless.

relieved to surrender to this authority. They lay aside their own attempts to construct a narrative of meaning, and allow the priest to impose one upon them. This surrender to ritualized authority provides them with the solace they need. But while the priest does provide a narrative that “life goes on, in Christ,” his story of salvation is less reassuring to Billy’s family than the Catholic sacramental ritual of the Rosary:

Abruptly, before Maeve could say another word, the priest asked us all to say a Rosary with him, understanding (of course) that there was only so much more that could be said, that the repetitiveness of prayers, the hushed drone of repeated, and by its numbing repetition, nearly wordless, supplication, was the only antidote, tonight, for Maeve’s hopelessness. (155)

In the rosary, the priest provides a counter-narrative to despair; one that is sacramental, in that it unites both word and action. It is an instantiation of faith that is more powerful than narrative alone. It is not the priest’s attempt to make sense of Billy’s death that matters in that moment, but rather the embrace of ritual. This moment, which is echoed throughout McDermott’s oeuvre by similar scenes of sacramental Catholicism (such as the wedding that closes *After This*), is McDermott’s implicit response to Hungerford’s claim that the content of belief does not matter; although the hierarchical dissemination of the content of Catholic belief may be less rigorous than in the pre-Vatican II era,¹² the tradition of Catholic sacramentality, which unites belief and practice, remains lasting and significant.

In McDermott’s novels, there are no deathbed conversions, or miraculous transformations and infusions of grace. McDermott poses hard questions about the adequacy of faith in the modern, skeptical age. She shines her fictional lens on the

¹² No Catholic is now forced to memorize the question and answer format of the *Baltimore Catechism*, for instance.

misery, pain, violence, and suffering of the world, and looks at how we attempt to make sense of these traumas. McDermott says we do so with a story; we submit ourselves to a narrative of existence, or we create our own, that helps us find order and meaning. Sometimes this narrative includes the embrace of religious belief, and sometimes this acceptance of faith provides solace. She makes no definitive claims for the power of narrative, or of faith. The answers they provide are, at best, partial; but her fiction indicates that partial answers, and glimpses of solace, are the best options that we have in the modern age.

Annie Dillard's Fiction: Death, Contemplation, and Active Love

Alice McDermott responds to the reality and inevitability of suffering and death first through the assertion of a narrative that provides some semblance of meaning, and, when that narrative breaks down, through reliance on ritual. Other writers in the Catholic tradition have markedly different responses to the finality of death. Within the work of Annie Dillard, for instance, death and suffering often lead toward contemplation, wonder, and awe. Any reader of Dillard's fiction, non-fiction, or poetry will note how her imagination is repeatedly drawn to images of violence and suffering. For Dillard, these moments are not cause for despair or a flight from rationality, but rather they serve as an occasion for the individual to pay attention to what is happening in his or her life and surrounding environment. Violence functions as a wake-up call within Dillard's writing (as it does in O'Connor's fiction); the typical Dillard character, who is usually some version of the writer herself, is often awoken to a new way of seeing and understanding

the presence of divinity at work in the world, or what might be described as mystical insight, a comprehension of reality beyond words.

Within Dillard's non-fiction in particular, reflections on violence and suffering lead directly to contemplation of transcendence. For Dillard, if one pays enough attention to the natural world then it can serve as a revelation of the divine. Dillard's writing manifests the type of sacramental sensibility that critic Mary Reichardt identifies as a fundamental aspect of Catholic aesthetics: "a defining feature of a Catholic vision and one that sets it apart from strictly deterministic theories is that it is open to supernatural mystery, the existence of another world beyond that of the senses to which human beings are ultimately oriented" (4).¹³ Dillard's work is constantly pointing toward the presence of transcendent mystery, and this mystical element within Dillard's work is something noted by a number of critics.¹⁴ None of these critics discuss Dillard's fiction in any depth, though, and this is a significant omission because although both novels convey the same sacramental conception of reality that is found in her non-fiction, where the natural world and the people within it serve as indications of the presence of God, the novels also

¹³ See Colleen Warren's *Annie Dillard and the Word Made Flesh: An Incarnation Theory of Language* (2010), particularly Chapter 6 "Sacramental Meaning," for a detailed discussion of sacramentality in Dillard's work. Warren examines both Dillard's understanding of the specific sacraments of Baptism and Communion, and her broader sacramental view of existence, or what Warren calls Dillard's "conviction that meaning exists and obtains its reality through the spiritual" (115).

¹⁴ For instance, Sandra Humble Johnson, in *The Space Between: Literary Epiphany in the Work of Annie Dillard* (1992), describes Dillard as "both mystic and romantic" (61), whose work captures "moments...of mystical experience" (9); Sue Yore, in *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity: Transcending Theological Boundaries in the Writings of Iris Murdoch, Denise Levertov and Annie Dillard* (2009), writes that Dillard seeks "spiritual meaning through a synthesis of imagination and intellect in dialogue with the mystical tradition" (14). Yore goes on to note, in language that calls to mind the phrasing of William Lynch, "For Dillard, surrendering oneself to the blinding presence of God is not about escape from this world, but a deeper encounter with reality" (236).

provide an important counterpart to the mystical revelations of her non-fiction. In particular, *The Maytrees* (2007), her last novel and final published work,¹⁵ emphasizes the values of community and loving service, rather than mystical transcendence, even though it is in part a character study of a woman, Lou Bigelow, who becomes a sort of modern day ascetic and mystic. Because of its exploration of both contemporary mysticism and its prioritizing of love in action, I find it to be Dillard's most recognizably Catholic work. This may be surprising, since although Dillard has long identified herself with the Catholic faith, in recent years she has disavowed membership in any particular faith tradition – her website currently lists her religious affiliation as “none.”¹⁶ She has provided no further explanation of her current religious practice.

Despite her current lack of religious identification, it is still an enlightening project to read Dillard in light of the Catholic literary tradition, and there are a number of valid reasons for continuing to do so, including the persistence of Catholic themes within her work. In 1994, she received the Campion Medal for her “contribution to the Catholic tradition of arts and letters” and her ability to meld her “craft and religious conviction” (C Smith). Dillard, like Percy, Waugh and Greene, was a convert to Catholicism; she joined the church in 1988, citing Catholicism's diversity as an important factor in her choice of a faith tradition: “What I like about the Catholics is that they have this sort of mused-up human way. You go to the Episcopal church, and people are pretty much all alike. You go to a Catholic church, and there are people of all different colors and ages, and babies

¹⁵ Dillard has claimed in a number of venues that she will not publish any more works; see *New York Magazine*, 25 June 2007: “Legendary Writer Retires: Dillard's Done.”

¹⁶ See <http://www.anniedillard.com/curriculum-vitae.html>

squalling. You're taking a stand with these people. You're saying: 'Here I am. One of the people who love God.' They're really universal, really catholic" (Cantwell). This idea of presence amidst a community of worship is important to Dillard; she cited it in a later interview as well, noting, "One of the main points of Catholicism is anonymity. Nobody looks at you when you go to a Catholic church. You just stand up there and worship and hang out, sort of representing the body of people on earth" (Gross).

She has often discussed the religious, and particularly Catholic, dimensions of her work, although she has not made as many explicit claims regarding the connection between her faith and her work in the twenty-first century as she did in the 1980s and '90s. When asked to describe the relationship between her "spiritual life as a Catholic and [her] artistic writing life" Dillard responded, "They're intimately linked. I almost always end up writing about religion" (Abood). She goes on to explain that even though her work may not necessarily focus on Catholic characters, her themes are influenced by the Catholic faith tradition. Speaking specifically about her novel *The Living*, she notes that its focus on mortality and the inevitability of death, or what she describes as the main character's realization that "the fact that he lives under death gives him life," is "a religious insight" (Abood), and she connects this insight to the monastic practice of keeping "a freshly dug grave right next to the chapel," as a sort of persistent *momento mori*. Throughout her work, both non-fiction and fiction, Dillard continually explores this relationship between mortality and life's meaning; within her work, the constant reminder of the inevitability of death brings "clarity to [people's] lives and thoughts" (Abood).

But this is not to say that Dillard glosses over the reality of pain and suffering in favor of an easy recourse to millennial alternatives to suffering. If anything, her work highlights the cruelty of both humanity and nature, and she explores how humanity can possibly respond to, or make sense of, the violence of the world. Bruce Ronda notes that Dillard's answer to the problem of evil, and suffering, is essentially a contemplative one. He asserts that Dillard's work is "dominated by the experience of suffering," and that it manifests the belief that "willingness to suffer is essential to the contemplative life," which he connects to the long tradition of Christian mysticism. Ronda notes that this tradition holds that "suffering can bring new seeing, new feeling and new awareness, it is a path to God. Fully receptive and open, the contemplative is increasingly aware of her own pain and the pain around her." He concludes that Dillard's ability to make the connection "between knowing deeply and suffering deeply makes her a mystic for our time."¹⁷

But while there are many ways that discussing Dillard as Catholic writer helps to illuminate her influences and her artistic goals, it would be a mistake to argue that she is a particularly orthodox writer. Dillard has disavowed any interest in doctrine, claiming, "That's not what religion is about. It's about living the life in a relationship with God. And you don't have to believe any of that stuff. It's not a matter of checking a list of beliefs, to say, 'Yes, without crossing any fingers, I can say yes to all these things.'"

¹⁷ Ronda's analysis is very similar to that of Sue Yore, in *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity*, but Ronda makes a more definitive link between Dillard's contemplation of violence and pain in the world around her and her own experience of suffering. Yore links Dillard's contemplation of suffering to the practice of worship: "the only response to the numerous brutalities that Dillard can think of is one of worship, and so she sets off to the local parish church with a bottle of communion wine tucked under her arm" (204), but Ronda posits a middle step, in which Dillard enters fully into the experience of suffering.

(Gross). Here she seems to be echoing Hungerford's claim that the content of belief does not matter, but her work reveals a more nuanced relationship between belief and religious practice. In her nonfiction she repeatedly turns to religious thinkers (from a variety of faith traditions) in order to see how what they believed about God and the relationship between God and humanity affected their conception of existence. In her novels, the connection between beliefs and actions is equally important, and although her characters are not, for the most part, Catholic, their worldviews are compatible, and often indistinguishable, from a Catholic understanding of existence.¹⁸ So although in recent years Dillard has provided no information, in interviews or in print, as to her current religious practices beyond declaring her current lack of religious affiliation, I am primarily interested in the religious sensibility manifested in her work and the connections that can be made between what her characters believe and how they respond to violence and intimations of their own mortality.

Her work is a challenge to both the believer and the skeptic. In her focus on suffering and violence, she makes those who would provide pious platitudes about "the will of God" think, carefully, if such an idea of God is worthy of belief or reverence¹⁹; at the same time, she pushes the non-believer toward moments of revelation and transcendence, indicating that despite the violence of the world, there is more to living

¹⁸ This is particularly significant in the case of Lou Bigelow, whose denial of self-interest and embrace of self-sacrificial service embody central tenets of Catholic ethics, although these ethical mores are not, of course, exclusive to Catholicism.

¹⁹ In *For the Time Being*, she writes, "Many times in Christian churches I have heard the pastor say to God, 'All your actions show your wisdom and love.' Each time, I reach in vain for the courage to rise and shout, 'That's a lie!' – just to put things on a solid footing." (85).

than the ‘nasty, brutish, and short’ competition for survival. She told *Notre Dame Alumni Magazine* her work often “starts with the most appalling suffering that people have.

There's a reason for that. I'm trying to get rid of the idle reader who thinks of me as this little mystic nature writer. That's why I make the beginnings of my books tougher and tougher: if you can't stand this, would you please put this book down? Don't buy it, don't write me a letter, don't complain” (quoted in Gross). At the same time, her work does not simply wallow in this suffering. It pushes through it, uses it, to gain a new awareness of divine presence amidst the suffering.

Critics have noted this dynamic in her non-fiction,²⁰ but since Dillard is most often categorized, and studied, as a nature writer or as a spiritual writer, rather than as a novelist, the connections between violence, suffering and insight have been overlooked in her fiction. While these connections form the core of her sprawling historical novel *The Living*, I find *The Maytrees* to be Dillard’s most compelling attempt to make sense of the relationship between suffering and grace. The novel is a spare, lyrical meditation on love and death. The central significance of the latter should come as no surprise to any Dillard reader; she did, after all, conclude her book *On Writing* with an extended reflection about a stunt pilot who dies a fiery death after crashing his plane mid-stunt. It would be impossible to overstate the significance of violence – random, deliberate, natural, or premeditated – on Dillard’s imagination. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), her most

²⁰ See particularly “The Dark Side of Existence” and “The Dark Night” in Sue Yore’s *The Mystic Way in Postmodernity* (pages 173-82, 201-09), in which Yore connects Dillard’s intense focus on suffering to the mystical tradition of the *via negativa*, which teaches that “an awareness and acceptance of suffering...is the precursor to theological transformation and integration” (204).

celebrated work, is at least as preoccupied with the violence of the natural world as it is with its beauty and transcendent signification.²¹ This theme clearly remains central to her literary imagination, since she was still grappling with it twenty-five years later in *For The Time Being* (1999), which makes the connection between suffering and grace its central theme. *Holy the Firm* (1977), though, is her most extended meditation on the role of suffering in the world, and it is worth taking a moment to note the conclusions that Dillard offers her readers in this short work, because they differ dramatically, and significantly, from the ones offered in *The Maytrees*.

I must admit that I find *Holy the Firm* to be problematic. The central meditation of the book involves a girl, Julie Norwich, who suffers terrible burns to her face after a plane accident, and Dillard uses the senselessness and randomness of this accident to raise probing questions about the nature and significance of suffering, and she does so in an evocative, stirring way. The tripartite structure of the book reflects three different approaches to suffering: pagan, rationalist and mystical, which Dillard claimed correspond to “creation, fall and redemption,” in which “redemption comes in terms of mystical experience,” which allows “the person who prays [to] know precisely the kind of power he’s addressing” (Abood). Colleen Warren contends that *Holy the Firm* “confirm(s) [Dillard’s] belief that suffering yields illumination and can enable spiritual connectedness” (137). Warren writes that Dillard transforms “pain, suffering, and death”

²¹ Think, for instance, of her startling depiction of the water-bug attacking a frog, “suck[ing] out the victim’s body, [which is] reduced to a juice” (8), or her discussion of the “horrors” of the insect world, which she describes as “an assault on all human value, all hope of a reasonable god” (64-65), or the entirety of the chapter “Fecundity,” in which she details “the teeming evidence that birth and growth, which we value, are ubiquitous and blind, that life itself is so astonishingly cheap, that nature is as careless as she is bountiful, and that with extravagance goes a crushing waste that will one day include out own cheap lives...every glistening egg is a *memento mori*” (162).

into “emblems of beauty, insight and spiritual renewal” (138). Warren is correct in identifying these as the goals of the book, and in a sense Dillard is successful in achieving them. But I find her aestheticization of Julie’s pain and suffering, and her use of it as means of moving reader and writer towards a moment of transcendence, to be in some way distasteful and dishonest. Dillard’s meditation ends up leaving the actual physical personhood of Julie behind, as the narrator imagines a future for Julie in a convent. Julie herself does not experience the narrator’s moment of insight or transformation, nor does she even know of it. She is left to suffer while the narrator, led by her meditations on Julie’s suffering, is moved towards a moment of mystical communion with the transcendent.

I find this final movement, in which the narrator transmutes Julie’s suffering into her own artistic, indeed ecstatic, insight, to be an inadequate response to the problems raised throughout the rest of the book. One of the indelible images of *Holy the Firm* is of a moth that wanders into a candle flame and becomes part of the fire: “And then this moth-essence...began to act as a wick. She kept burning...She burned for two hours without changing, without bending or leaning – only glowing within, like a building fire glimpsed through silhouetted walls, like a hollow saint, like a flame-faced virgin gone to God” (17). The moth’s suffering and sacrifice are linked to the artist’s process of self-emptying sacrifice, which is a powerful image, but when the narrator goes further, and links this also to Julie’s suffering, she begins to mistake metaphor for compassion. The final movement of the book ignores the essential humanity and uniqueness of the individual in question. What is the connection between the narrator’s contemplative

vision and the actual physical suffering of Julie Norwich (who, if it matters, was based on a real individual whom Dillard knew)?

It is this gap between suffering and insight that Dillard addresses so well in her two novels. In her fiction, Dillard never glosses over the essential humanity and uniqueness of her characters in favor of mystical insight. Rather, she demonstrates how the one who suffers can gain insight through his or her own suffering and exposure to mortality. This dynamic, in which a character who suffers is able to experience insight and new awareness as a result of this suffering, forms the core insight of her first novel, *The Living*. *The Living* enacts the arc of mistaken worldview, suffering and insight that we have traced out in the work of so many other Catholic writers. All of these writers envision scenarios in which moments of violence are also paradoxically moments of grace, and *The Living*, written not long after Dillard's conversion to Catholicism, is no different. *The Living* is also the most persistently violent novel that I discuss; set in the mid-1800s in a frontier settlement on Bellingham Bay in Washington, the novel details the inhospitality of nature, as well as the cruelty of humanity. The novel catalogues the myriad ways people can, and do, die: "Men died from trafficking in superior forces, like rivers and horses, bulls, steam saws, mill gears, quarried rock, or falling trees or rolling logs. Women died in rivers, too, and under trees and rockslides, and men took fevers, too, and fevers took men" (151). As Mary Cantwell notes in her *New York Times* review of the novel, "The world is cruel to the people in *The Living*, as cruel as it was to their real-life counterparts." As the deaths pile up, in all of their randomness, the book comes to serve as a reminder of the fragility of life, and the ways that the constant reminder of

one's mortality changes the individual. Dillard is reminding us that although we no longer face as many threats to our lives as the settlers once did, we too will nevertheless die one day. What are we to make of the time that we have before the inevitable end, and how does the awareness of our own mortality affect our actions?

This theme is crystallized in the encounter between the crazed hermit Beal Obenchain and one of the protagonists, Clare Fishburn, in which Obenchain decides to threaten Fishburn's life in order to gain power over him. Obenchain explains his rationale: "You simply tell a man, any man, that you are going to kill him. Then – assuming he believes you enough to watch his every step but not quite enough to run away or kill you first – then you take pains not to kill him and instead watch what he does, stuck alive on your bayonet and flailing. ...If...you make a man believe that you will arrange for his dying at any moment, then you can, in effect, possess his life" (187). Obenchain believes this threat will allow him to rob Fishburn of the essence of his life, and will "reveal to Fishburn, inescapably, the spectacle of himself as a whipped and trembling dog, one of more than one billion whipped dogs who trotted about the planet on business, naked and plug-ignorant" (193). But while this threat does reveal something to Fishburn about his own essence, this insight does not dehumanize him; rather it serves to wake Fishburn out of his feckless state of being. Although he does initially feel fear, the newfound awareness of his own impending death causes him to start living his life in a newly present fashion.

With Obenchain's threat hanging over him, Fishburn "no longer felt any flat and bounded horizon encircling him at a distance. Every place was a tilting edge. ...Time was

a hook in his mouth. Time was reeling him in jawfirst; it was reeling him in, headlong and breathless, to a shore he had not known was there” (217-18). He has awoken to an awareness of the connection between time and mortality; this connection is central to one of the key insights of William Lynch’s *Christ and Apollo*, in which Lynch describes mortality’s “connection with temporality” as one of “dying every moment to the past and the present” (58). In Lynch’s formulation, the individual’s awareness of day to day, moment to moment, mortality forces him or her to remain grounded in finite reality, and “only by staying within this structure of temporality and moving with it can one gain access to real insight” (51). Lynch contends that many artists, particularly those who try to speak to the experience of transcendence or divinity, seek to escape time by depicting an ecstatic experience that takes place in the infinite, outside of the strictures of time. These artists contend that “time is a thing that must be escaped from, since it leads neither to insight, beauty, God, peace, nor anything else” (50); contrary to this position, Lynch contends that artists who wish to “produce insight and illumination” must do so by depicting “a highly conscious submission to and movement through the forms of time, even unto death...and a relentless search for insight into what happens to a human soul as it courses through event after event” (61). This is the structural model at play in Dillard’s *The Living*, where Clare Fishburn’s exposure to Obenchain’s threat brings Fishburn to a new awareness of his own finite lifespan.

Over the course of the novel, we see that Obenchain’s threat has broadened and deepened Fishburn’s character. His wife notices that he was “no longer the pleased, blithely unconscious boy he was during their early marriage, and no longer the piddling,

unconscious, institutional man she feared he was becoming, he has awakened and hardened. ...He had slowed and straightened; he thought about what other people said, and developed a deliberate, attentive courtesy, like a doctor's, as if the other people were themselves all stricken and sliding into their graves, and not Clare" (293-94). Fishburn identifies the key insight that Obenchain's threat alerted him to: "Of course, he had always known he was going to die. He never, however, believed it" (319). Now that he believes in his own mortality, he rededicates himself to a more aware, contemplative existence. Clare Fishburn becomes an instantiation of the Misfit's claim about the grandmother in O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find": "She would of been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (*Works* 153). Obenchain's threat functions like the Misfit's gun; it wakes the protagonist up and allows him to change his life. Since Obenchain does not kill Fishburn, the reader can see how this transformation plays out over time, rather than intuiting it from a brief word and gesture, as in O'Connor's story.

The Living is such a long novel, though, that this very virtue – the depiction of Fishburn's newly invigorated life is actually lived out over time – gets somewhat lost in the sprawling discursiveness of the work. In contrast, the paired down sparseness of Dillard's last novel, *The Maytrees*, provides the reader with a more focused treatment of the same theme. Originally drafted as a monumental tome, like *The Living*, Dillard trimmed the novel down to its essential elements, leaving only what she felt was necessary to her essential theme.²² And while the novel is a meditation on many things –

²² She told Scott Simon the novel was once over 1200 pages.

the nature of love, the ability of art to capture experience, the effect of the natural world on shaping character, the inevitability of death – it addresses the central concern of *Holy the Firm* in what, to me, is a more adequate way. *The Maytrees* poses the question, ‘how do we respond to suffering – both our own and that of other people’ and then sets about answering it as directly, and humanly, as possible. The novel does not take refuge in mystical insights, but rather models an ethic of compassion and charity; in this sense, it is a demonstration of the Catholic concept of *orthopraxis*.

Dillard referred to *The Maytrees* as, “the great story...and I’ll never get another story that good” (Simon), a claim which might strike the reader as somewhat curious, since almost all of her works contain more unique and dramatic stories than the love between Lou Bigelow and Toby Maytree. What is it about this relationship that would warrant her calling it her “great story”? On one level, the narrative arc of their relationship is rather straightforward. Lou and Toby meet as young people on Cape Cod, fall in love, get married, have a child, and then drift apart. Toby leaves Lou for their mutual friend Deary, and Lou is left behind to figure out how to live on her own. In the novel’s most dramatic twist, twenty years later, after Deary is dying of cancer and Toby breaks his legs in a fall, he turns to Lou to help him care for Deary in her final illness. After Deary’s death, Lou and Toby reconnect and live out their days together. What is most compelling about this arc is not Lou and Toby’s love,²³ but rather the way that Lou handles Toby leaving her, and the way she ultimately responds to his request for help.

²³ Not all readers or critics agree with this assessment. Michael Jordan, writing in *Logos*, contends that “the heart of *The Maytrees* is the reality of family love” and that “Dillard’s novel...brings us into the presence of the sacredness of marital love. Dillard’s art shows that language shaped by a spiritually rich and intense

Toby's abandonment of Lou functions in the novel rather like Beal Obenchain's threat to Clare Fishburn. It is a traumatic moment that awakens Lou to the reality of time, and loss. She has been living as if all of her days were the same, like nothing would ever change for her. This false sense of security, though, is belied throughout the novel by the narrator's interspersed hints about the fragility of life and the pervasiveness of death. The novel indicates that on the broadest possible level the world is a violent place that we cannot hope to fully understand. For such a slim volume, the novel is littered with references to moments of violence, from the violence of humanity, including the murder of "the Woman in the Dunes," whose decapitated, raped and mutilated corpse was found in the wilderness of the dunes – "no one ever found who she was, or her killer, or her other hand, or her head" (13); to the violence done by humans to the natural world, including the fishermen who catch a shark and then "slit its belly and gave it its own entrails to chew" (83), or Deary's chopping up a horseshoe crab, and "as its halves crawled apart and away, she gathered them back as one would join the halves of an onion, gave them a half turn, and split them again. Lou remembered that the animal's four quarters also tried to crawl away" (174); to the violence done by nature, including a number of horrific depictions of men drowning – "two men oystering the bay at low tide got stuck...when the tide came in, it drowned them. Later at a sunny half tide their torsos stuck out again, bent" (71); or the extended depiction of "the frozen fishing crew [Lou] watched drown one day at Peaked Hill Bars thirty yards off the beach where the

concern with attending to the grace and beauty offered to us as a gift in each present moment can illuminate the sacred fullness of experience" (7, 9). Jordan is right that Dillard's novel does provide us with a profound depiction of marital love, but I find the true uniqueness of the novel to be found in her depiction of non-familial love.

townspeople stood helpless” (184). There is no narrative that can make sense of this kind of violence, and Dillard does not even try to explain it. Rather, she offers as a counterpoint the life of Lou Bigelow, a woman who suffers some small measure of pain, but is able to respond with love.

In *The Maytrees*, Dillard indicates that the kind of suffering she detailed in *For the Time Being* is essentially beyond comprehension, but on the level of the individual we can, and must, live in a way that tries to ameliorate suffering. Lou is first awoken to this reality by her own experience of pain, but her moment of insight is not instantaneous; her transformation is hard won. After Toby leaves her, “she fell apart” (89), and Dillard’s description of this disintegration is both mental and physical; Lou experiences her loss as a physical ailment; she wishes she could “have lashed her elbows and knees, like Aleuts” (a reference to the Native American tribe who dealt with grief by “lash[ing] hide bindings around your knees, ankles, elbows, shoulders and hips. You could still move, barely, as if swaddled. Otherwise, the Aleuts said, in your grief you would go to pieces just as the skeleton would go to pieces. You would fall apart” (48)). Toby does not die, but Lou’s experience of loss is likened to losing him to death, and her experience of both mourning and growth are similar.

Lou is not simply gifted with insight as a result of her grief and loss; she needs to work for it. She begins by hiking daily up the Pilgrim Monument; this physical action is linked to her emotional and spiritual renewal: “she could climb the monument every day and work on herself as a task” (91). After two months of this, “she saw the task would take practice, like anything else. She planned to work at it for a year, shedding every

grain of claim” (92). Her goal is “overcoming self-centeredness” (93); in her daily physical exertion and movement towards mastering “resentment, self-cherishing, and envy (93), she is like the narrator of *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, who, through her explorations in the woods, sought “a reduction, a shedding, a sloughing off” (*Pilgrim* 251). But the end goal for Lou is not insight into the ways of the world, or the appearance of the transcendent within the natural order of things; she seeks “self-mastery” (93). Lou becomes, in effect, a monastic figure, living simply in solitude, seeking to conquer her passions and desires, and this experience of contemplative growth is depicted exactly as William Lynch contends it must be – through a physical process that takes place within temporality.

Immediately after detailing Lou’s process of surrendering her ego and moving towards insight, Dillard makes a temporal leap forward in the narrative, showing the outcome of Lou’s self-mastery: “Two decades later, as it happened, while she was washing around Deary’s deepest and most noisome bedsore, she asked herself: If she, Lou, had known how long her first half-inch beginning to let go would take – and how long her noticing and renouncing owning and her turning her habits, and beginning the slimmest self-mastery whose end was nowhere in sight – would she have begun?” (93). In this radical leap forward in time, which is indicated merely by a double line space on the page, Dillard is both jarring the reader into a new awareness of time and its effects, and also showing the outcome of Lou’s process of internal growth.

In *The Maytrees*, self-mastery is not an end unto itself. Rather, Lou’s new awareness of herself as a person in time leads directly to her demonstration of

orthopraxis, her performance of love in action. This is not a connection unique to Catholicism, but it is a central tenet of the Catholic faith. The end goal of contemplation is knowledge of God, but, as Thomas Merton explains in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961), “One of the paradoxes of the mystical life is this: that a man cannot enter into the deepest center of himself and through that center into God, unless he is able to pass entirely out of himself and empty himself and give himself to other people in the purity of a selfless love” (66). Lou’s active charity, her taking care of the woman who stole away her husband, is a striking image of the performance of *caritas*. When Toby seeks Lou out, asking her to help care for Deary in her final sickness, Lou thinks, “Of course she would take them in. Anyone would” (165). This assumption, that anyone/ everyone would accept back not only the man who abandoned her twenty years earlier and whom she has not seen since, but would also would take in and care for the ‘other woman,’ shows how far Lou has progressed in her journey towards insight and self-mastery. Lou thinks, “What was solitude for if not to foster decency?” (165), which is as succinct an account of the monastic ideal as one could ask. Lou’s demonstration of love allows Toby, a poet who has spent much of the novel contemplating the nature of love, to finally realize “love was an act of will” (187).

This is the final insight of the novel, and perhaps it is profound enough to merit Dillard describing this novel as “her great story.” In this novel, Dillard uses the trope seen in so many Catholic novels, where a moment of shocking violence begins a process of growth and insight, but she so does so in a fashion that is less shocking than O’Connor, and less troubling than McDermott, but what works so powerfully in this

novel is that Dillard is able to actually show the outcome of the final action. We see the love carried out. Lou does not gain insight and then immediately die, or instantly gain insight and then carry on her life more or less as she was before but now infused with a new appreciation of it; she works daily towards self-mastery and we follow both the process of her relinquishing her will and the ultimate outcome of this work. The novel is a profound instantiation of Lynch's contentions about the depiction of grace in literature – it must not involve unspecified dramatic leaps outside of time but rather it must be grounded in real lives and specific experiences. Lou Bigelow's movement from a shocked and betrayed woman to one who actively and selflessly cares for the woman and man who betrayed her demonstrates just this sort of growth. Ultimately, in *The Maytrees*, Dillard faces the reality of suffering and death, and she depicts them not as questions that must be answered or as realities that must be fled, but as aspects of existence that must be addressed through the active practice of love. In this sense, although Dillard may no longer have been an active Catholic while writing *The Maytrees*, the novel reflects a profoundly Catholic conception of existence.

Conclusion: “Obscure is not Invisible”

Gregory Wolfe, writing in *The Wall Street Journal*, responded to Paul Elie's lament over the lack of contemporary literature of belief by asserting that, “the myth of secularism triumphant in the literary arts is just that – a myth,” a claim I am very much in agreement with. Both Elie and Wolfe reflect on O'Connor's claim that “For the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.” Elie's position is that no one is doing any shouting about their beliefs today (at least in

literature; he is aware that, “These days it is real live religious people who seem always to be shouting – large and startling figures in the pulpit, at the rally, on the courthouse steps and outside the White House”); Wolfe counters by claiming, “Today the faith found in literature is more whispered than shouted.” Again, I find Wolfe’s position to be more convincing, but it is incomplete. In contemporary literature, writers of religious conviction are unlikely to use their work to “shout” about their beliefs, but there are a myriad of instances in which they still “draw large startling figures” in their fictions in order to catch their readers’ attention and direct them towards questions of faith. Tim Gautreaux, Alice McDermott and Annie Dillard (and Ron Hansen, John L’Heureux and Andre Dubus) use moments of violence and shock, as O’Connor and Percy did, to get their readers to pay attention to questions of belief, but in these more recent fictions the proffered insight about faith and belief is usually not going to come via a moment of “revelation” which brings about the experience of grace (as we might find in an O’Connor story). Within contemporary literature, declarations of belief are scarce, and depictions of faith are ambiguous and inconclusive.²⁴

O’Connor wrote about the importance of mystery in the depiction of grace; in contemporary literature this aspect of mystery is allowed to reign supreme, and there is little attempt to clarify or explain what, if any, reality exists behind the mystery. Wolfe writes, “grace works in obscure, mysterious ways. But obscure is not invisible.” Both Alice McDermott and Annie Dillard use their fiction to grapple with the nature of what it means to have faith in the modern world, and while their ultimate pronouncements about

²⁴ Although, again, it would be a mistake to conclude that the insights on grace and belief found in the fiction of either O’Connor or Percy are always particularly clear or definitive.

the viability of belief are indeed obscure, they are present, and worth contemplating. Whether we are reflecting upon McDermott's depiction of the comfort provided by sacramental ritual when rational understanding and narratives of meaning fail, or Dillard's assertion that mystical insights must be grounded in the real and must be worked for both through active reflection and active charity, we can find within these stories demonstrations of the challenges, and rewards, of a life of faith. So although the manifestation of grace within contemporary Catholic literature may not be particularly orthodox, or even necessarily readily visible, it does continue to endure.

CHAPTER FIVE

“YOUR TEMPLE IS SELF AND SENTIMENT”:

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE’S DIAGNOSTIC NOVELS

Of all of the authors under consideration in this study, David Foster Wallace is certainly the outlier, since Wallace was not Catholic. This important biographical fact leads directly to a fundamental question: “What is David Foster Wallace doing in a study of contemporary Catholic literature?” In large part, I wanted to conclude this study with an examination of Wallace’s work because I think Wallace is the most significant American writer of his generation, and I believe that by reading Wallace in conjunction with the Catholic literary tradition we can begin to understand aspects of his work that have heretofore been overlooked. Wallace is most often discussed as a post-post-modern or philosophical writer, not as a religious or Christian one, and this is a mistake. Upon close examination of his life and work, we will come to see that Wallace was deeply engaged with questions of religious belief and practice, and that he was particularly intrigued by aspects of Catholicism.

But I include Wallace here not simply because I believe reading his work in light of the Catholic novel helps us better understand his fictional project; I also think his work can help us better understand the direction of the Catholic novel in contemporary America. Wallace’s work is actually a perfectly logical place to conclude this study of the aesthetics of contemporary Catholic literature, because on a continuum of religious

writers he occupies the next logical step beyond the work of someone like Annie Dillard, whose own affiliation with Catholicism is itself tenuous. Throughout this study, I have been demonstrating the ways in which Catholic literature has become, in recent years, less orthodox in its concerns, and more ambiguous in its portrayals of faith. Catholic writers continue to point toward the reality of, and need for, God, but their fiction does not claim to know much about the nature of this God, and while these fictions point toward moments of revelation, in which God's presence may become manifest, there is nothing definitive or dogmatic about these revelations. Wallace's fiction includes such revelatory moments, and is particularly innovative in its depiction of the relationship between human and the divine.

Wallace's novels diagnose what has gone in contemporary America, and this diagnosis is largely an indictment of America's inability to countenance pain and suffering. Wallace's solution to this problem is largely spiritual in nature; he offers a model of submitting one's will to a higher power, and of joining a faith community in order to find the support to make this submission sustainable. As I discuss below, I believe that Wallace, both in his diagnosis and cure, was influenced by his exposure to elements of the Catholic literary tradition; I also believe his work can serve as a new and exciting model for Catholic writers who are seeking for ways to continue making depictions of the sacred meaningful in our secular age. My focus in this chapter is primarily on the ways that Wallace's fiction depicts the challenges of faith and belief that we have examined in the previous chapters, and on how Wallace structures his fiction in order to engage his readers on these topics. He, like the Catholic writers I study, believes

that fiction can do something to the reader; that the act of reading can spur the individual to question preconceived notions about reality, and that the act of reading and reflection can become part of the cure for what afflicts modern America. While Wallace relies less on the use of violence to affect his characters and readers than many of the other writers studied here, it is nevertheless an important aspect of the structure of his fiction, and will be discussed in turn.

Wallace and the Catholic Literary Tradition

Throughout “Joseph Frank’s Dostoevsky,” David Foster Wallace’s 1996 review essay on Frank’s biography of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Wallace continually interrupts himself to pose the sorts of existential and moral questions that he contends Dostoevsky, and other nineteenth century novelists, engaged with in their fiction: “Am I a good person?...What exactly does ‘faith’ mean? ...[What] is the real point of my life? ...Is it possible really to love other people? ...Does this guy Jesus Christ’s life have something to teach me...?” (*Consider* 259-261). Wallace believes that one of Dostoevsky’s great strengths is his “degree of passion, conviction, and engagement with deep moral issues that we – here, today – cannot or do not permit ourselves,” and he contends that late twentieth century novelists keep “an ironic distance from deep convictions or desperate questions,” if they write about such things at all (271). He maintains that contemporary writers, particularly writers of “literary fiction,” write about faith, ethics and values only ironically, because serious engagement with such issues has been undermined by the post-structuralist claims that all meaning and value is relative. But, as many of Wallace’s

critics have noted, he himself sought to address these questions in his own fiction,¹ and I contend that he did so in a manner that places his work alongside the long tradition of Christian, specifically Catholic, literature, which includes the work of such authors as Francois Mauriac, Georges Bernanos, Graham Greene, Muriel Spark, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy (to name but a few of the most representative authors). This is not a company in which Wallace is often discussed, and he might not have been fully comfortable in such company, since he himself did not formally belong to any Christian denomination, but throughout his life he did experiment with a number of faith traditions, particularly Catholicism, and he maintained an active prayer life.² And, more significantly, I contend that it makes sense to think of him as a Christian writer, and not just a post-postmodernist or philosophical one, because, while he is not in any way didactic or dogmatic, his work is preoccupied with issues of faith and doubt in the modern, secular world, and he positions these questions within a Christian framework.

Although Wallace was not Catholic, his work shares stylistic and thematic traits with the writers in the Catholic tradition, particularly the Americans O'Connor and Percy,

¹ See for instance Lee Konstantinou's "No Bull: David Foster Wallace and Postironic Belief," in which Konstantinou argues that, "For Wallace, creating postironic belief was the goal of literary communication"(85); Konstantinou defines postironic belief as being belief "emptied out of specific content" (86). I am contending that Wallace was interested in more than just decontextualized belief, and that his work manifests, albeit in new and surprising ways, rather traditional conceptions of grace and the reality of a transcendent God. For an alternate understanding of Wallace's rhetorical goals, see Paul Giles's "All Swallowed Up: David Foster Wallace and American Literature," in which Giles describes Wallace as "at some level a moralist and pedagogue" for whom "questions of moral imperative carry as much weight as their fictional correlative"(6, 9). While I agree with this claim, I think Giles's assessment of Wallace's moral framework, which he connects to Emerson and Thoreau and their "ambivalence towards the ontological reality of other people" (9), is misguided. Giles sees Wallace as being "invested in quite traditional Americanist values... Transcendentalism, community spirit, self-reliance and so on" (4), but I see Wallace's work as being self-consciously opposed to both Transcendentalist principles and the notion of self-reliance.

² Wallace wrote out a Benjamin Franklin style schedule for his daily life, titled "What Balance Would Look Like"; the list consists of only eight things, the last of which is simply "Church" (Max 238).

both of whom Wallace read; annotated copies of their work (O'Connor's *Complete Works* and *The Complete Stories* and Percy's *The Moviegoer*) can be found in his personal library, now housed at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas.³ Although Wallace shares many traits with O'Connor (including interests in regionalism, violence and the grotesque), on the thematic level, his work is more akin to Percy's Christian existentialism. Like Percy, Wallace was fixated on the isolation and despair of the individual in the midst of contemporary mass society, and (like Percy) Wallace's fiction indicates that the way beyond this alienation can be found in a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, or the embrace of a transcendent reality that one does not fully rationally comprehend. Percy's friend, the Catholic monk and poet Thomas Merton, describes the Christian existentialist as one who finds "the claim of science and technology to expand the capacity of the human person for life and happiness [to be] basically fraudulent, because technological society is not the least interested in values, still less in persons" (*Mystics* 263). Merton indicates that the Christian existentialist finds the counter to the alienation of modern technological society "in personal self-realization...in freedom, in responsibility, in dialogue (with man and God), and in love" (263). Wallace, like Percy, offers these same solutions to existential angst (including dialogue with the divine). But Wallace's fiction demonstrates more than a similar philosophical worldview to Percy's. Wallace's novels are excellent examples of what Percy described as diagnostic fiction,

³ The collection also includes a number of other books related to Christian (primarily Catholic) spirituality and practice, including Dorothy Day's *The Long Loneliness* (1981), Malachi Martin's *Hostage to the Devil: The Possession and Exorcism of Five Living Americans* (1992), Fr. Richard Rohr's *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer* (2003), and John Shea's *Stories of Faith* (1980); most are annotated by Wallace. D.T. Max notes that Wallace also gave C.S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters* as a gift to a girlfriend (252), and that he recommended Brian Moore's novel *Catholics* to Jonathan Franzen (164).

and, as in Percy's novels, both Wallace's diagnosis of the modern condition and his approach to a cure are shaped by the Christian tradition. This is, in part, because Wallace shared more than thematic interests with these other Catholic writers. He was, for a brief period, a practicing Catholic, and, as the posthumous publication of *The Pale King* reveals, he remained interested in Catholicism up to the time of his death.

There has been little critical commentary on Wallace's personal religious beliefs, or the impact of these beliefs on his work.⁴ Wallace's biographer, D.T. Max, dismisses Wallace's engagement with religion, writing, "Wallace's real religion was always language anyway. It alone could shape and hold multitudes; by comparison God's power was spindly" (Max 166).⁵ The critical piece that devotes the most time to Wallace's religious sensibility, "David Foster Wallace's Nihilism," the opening chapter in Hubert Dreyfus and Sean Dorrance Kelly's *All Things Shining: Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age* (2011), takes a similar position vis-à-vis the importance of faith in Wallace's work. Dreyfus and Kelly contend that "one finds in Wallace's work no hope for salvation by God, nor even any resignation to the loss of this hope. ... He seems to have lost even the memory for the sacred as it was traditionally understood; any notion, that is, of an external source of meaning for the return of which one could

⁴ In "The Brothers Incandenza: Translating Ideology in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*" (2007), a penetrating article on the similarities between Dostoevsky and Wallace, Timothy Jacobs contends, "While Dostoevsky and Wallace differ, they remain united as authors of belief, and their major novels express the nature of the individual struggling for belief in something larger than the self" (289). Jacobs, though, does not discuss the specifically Christian elements in Wallace's belief structure.

⁵ This casual dismissal of "God's power" is radically at odds with the depictions of faith that appear throughout Wallace's work; in *Infinite Jest* it is, after all, only the "Higher Power" of the God who "might regard the issue of whether you believe there's a God or not as fairly low on his/her/its list of things s/he/it's interested in re you" (205) that allows the addict to break the cycle of addiction.

legitimately hope or to the loss of which one could properly be resigned” (45). Much of Wallace’s work does reflect the loss of a transcendent source of meaning and value, but that is not the same thing as Wallace himself not believing in, or valuing, such a concept. Indeed, while individual sections of his work are nihilistic, the works as a whole tend to reflect a worldview that values the possibility of transcendence and universal meaning. This is a trait he shares with O’Connor and Percy, both of whom write about nihilists while striving to reflect the possibility that life holds out deeper signification. As discussed in previous chapters, contemporary Catholic literature is interested in the dialectical tension between these secular and sacred worldviews, and it derives much of its rhetorical strength by engaging with, not dismissing, the deterministic mindset of the secular age. Wallace’s work is so powerful because it holds both views in almost perfect tension; both biographically and artistically, Wallace embodied the uneasy balance between secular and sacred worldviews. He was interested enough in Catholicism to actively practice it for a time, but not convinced enough to become baptized; his fiction can be dismissive of any transcendent reality, but it also hints that having faith in a higher power might be necessary for living a meaningful life.

I see Wallace’s dialogue with, and portrayal of, religion as distinct from the forms of religious imagination found in the works of such writers as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon, who were both influential in Wallace’s development as a writer. Critics of the contemporary religious imagination, such as Amy Hungerford and Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, write that many contemporary American writers have moved towards a concept of the sacred that, in Hungerford’s terminology, consists of “belief without

content, belief in meaninglessness, belief for its own sake” (137), or what McCann and Szalay describe as the “sacralization of the sublimely irrational” (“Believe” 449) and the embrace of the “magical and non-authoritarian power” of language, which has “power only to the degree that it has nothing to say” (451). This emptying out of the content of language in favor of glossolalia, along with the disconnection of the sacred from lived reality, have little in common with Wallace’s treatment of the role of faith in the modern world. There are mystical elements in Wallace’s work, but they are not found on the level of language but in the content itself; he is interested in exploring meaning and signification, not their absence. McCann and Szalay write that Pynchon and DeLillo, among others, display a “yearning for largely incommunicable, millennial alternatives to the existing world” (456), but this is not Wallace’s project. There remains something ineffable about the reality of God and transcendence within his work, but this does not mean that nothing can be, or should be, said about them. Wallace eschews contentless spiritualism in favor of a more concrete, religious sensibility that critiques modernity and is grounded in action, ritual and practice.

Hungerford draws a distinction between the religious sensibility found in the works of the cultural Catholic Don DeLillo and the more orthodox Catholic writers Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy, and this distinction will help to clarify Wallace’s own religious imagination. One might expect that Wallace’s religious sensibility would be more in line with DeLillo’s, since DeLillo is an acknowledged influence on Wallace, but the religious valence of Wallace’s work actually is actually more similar to that of the orthodox Catholic writers. Hungerford notes that DeLillo’s work manifests a “mysticism

of language” that is devoid of specific, concrete elements of Catholicism (74), and she differentiates this from the fiction of O’Connor and Percy, which illustrates “unthinking Catholic obedience” and “unreasoning submission” to the authority of God (54). In Hungerford’s analysis, DeLillo’s work retains Catholic “traces” (53), but is markedly different from Percy’s depiction of faith, which “disregards agency, thoughtfulness, and reason” (54). While I disagree, strongly, with her assessment of Percy’s work and her assertion that he and O’Connor depict submission as being unreasoning or unthinking, she is correct that Catholic literature often does model a path of surrendering one’s disordered will to the higher power of God, and I contend that this, not DeLillo’s mystical use of language as a vehicle of transcendent experience, is the pattern that one finds in Wallace’s work. *Infinite Jest*, for instance, for all of its verbal virtuosity, does not present itself as religious experience; rather, it depicts a path of submission as the proper relation between the addict and the Higher Power of AA, and not only that, but just as in the Catholic fiction of O’Connor and Percy, this process necessitates a community of faith if it is to be successful.⁶ This pattern of surrendering one’s sense of self-interest in favor of something larger than oneself, which can be aligned with the transcendent, recurs throughout *The Pale King* as well.

For Wallace, as for the Catholic writers O’Connor and Percy, religious themes were important, and the challenge was to write about them in ways that sustained the

⁶ See John Desmond’s *Walker Percy’s Search for Community* (2010) and Susan Strigley’s *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art* (2004) for more on the significance of community in Catholic fiction. In Percy’s fiction, the concept of submitting oneself to God’s will is less pronounced than in O’Connor’s work, but Percy prioritizes the notion that the individual needs community if he or she is going to successfully enter into a relationship with the transcendent.

reader's interest. At the time that he was finishing work on *Infinite Jest*, Wallace wrote, "To me, religion is incredibly fascinating as a general abstract object of thought – it might be the most interesting thing there is. But when it gets to the point of trying to communicate specific or persuasive stuff about religion, I find I always get frustrated and bored. I think this is because the stuff that's truly interesting about religion is inarticulable" ("Quo Vadis" 7-8). When writing about issues of religious faith and doubt, Wallace is, as ever, self-aware and nuanced and complex,⁷ but his rhetorical flourishes are not the substance of his religious worldview; they are, rather, the vehicle for a message of hope grounded in a vision of existence that is, at its heart, largely Christian.

"Half of me is dying to give myself away": Wallace's Equivocal Christianity

The first published mention of Wallace's relationship to Catholicism is in his essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again," which recounts his experiences on a cruise-ship in March of 1995.⁸ Wallace mentions attending Catholic Mass while onboard the ship, and in this brief account he displays an insider's knowledge of Catholic practices: he comments on the consistency of the host relative to other communion wafers: "Even the Nadir's daily mass's communion wafers are unusually yummy, biscuitier than your normal host and with a sweet tinge" (*Supposedly* 323), which carries the implication that he has had a large enough sample size to make an informed judgment on a "normal host"; he also muses about the priest's pastoral assignment, wondering "just how a diocesan priest gets a 7NC Megacruiser as a parish" (323), in language that implies

⁷ See Adam Kelly's "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction" for a more detailed discussion of Wallace's treatment of the problem of sincere communication in an ironic age.

⁸ The piece was originally published as "Shipping Out," in *Harper's* (January 1996).

he at least understands the usual workings of a Catholic diocese; even his word choice when describing the priest's garments, "his cassock and white cope" (324), points toward more than superficial knowledge of Catholicism. Of course, he could have found out about these terms and practices through research, but the easy familiarity of the language in the scene led me to question whether Wallace was in fact a Catholic.

Interestingly, it turns out that Wallace was not a lapsed Catholic, but a *failed* one. One of the few interviews, profiles or critical pieces that talks about Wallace's faith life is a brief 1996 profile in *Details* magazine. In it, David Streitfeld reveals that although Wallace was, "Brought up an atheist, he has twice failed to pass through the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, the first step toward becoming a Catholic. The last time, he made the mistake of referring to 'the cult of personality surrounding Jesus'" (*Conversations* 69). This, unsurprisingly, did not sit well with the priest, who suspected that Wallace "might have a bit too much skepticism to make a fully obedient Catholic." Streitfeld's piece goes on to note that Wallace, "Recently found a Mennonite house of worship,"⁹ which leads one to the conclusion that sometime between his experience on the cruise-ship in March of 1995 and the time of the profile, in March of 1996, Wallace had ceased to identify, and worship, with the Catholic Church.¹⁰ One interesting

⁹ In his biography of Wallace, D.T. Max writes that Wallace's claims to belong to a Mennonite church were actually a cover story for his membership in an AA recovery circle (220).

¹⁰ Max's biography does note a number of occasions later in Wallace's life where he continues to engage with the Catholic Church, including a multi-day Jesuit retreat (231), and participation in a Cursillo retreat when he was once again considering converting to Catholicism. In this latter instance, "at the final ceremony, when the participants were meant to attest their belief in God, Wallace expressed his doubts instead" (251), which serves to reinforce my contention that Wallace was repeatedly drawn toward faith but was unable to let go of the doubts that kept him from fully surrendering – the tension that animates many of the struggles in both *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*.

dimension to this, though, is that Wallace was apparently a practicing Catholic for at least some of the time that he was writing *Infinite Jest*, which contributes to the spiritual valence of the novel.

In his interview with Streitfeld, Wallace described his attraction to religion, not in terms of absolute truth or transcendent reality, but in relation to the existential questions of existence – the themes of all of his fiction: loneliness, isolation, suffering. Speaking about his church, he said, “The more I believe in something, and the more I take something other than me seriously, the less bored I am, the less self-hating. I get less scared. When I was going through that hard time a few years ago, I was scared all the time.” Speaking honestly about his experience of faith and commitment to a church, he declares, “I’m a typical American...Half of me is dying to give myself away, and the other half is continually rebelling” (69).

This tension, between attraction to faith and the hesitance to surrender to it, turns up repeatedly in Wallace’s fiction. It also fits in with the way Wallace’s former girlfriend Mary Karr, the celebrated memoirist and Catholic convert, understood his spirituality¹¹: “He had a kind of vague, higher-power thing. It’s funny, when he first got sober I remember he said, ‘Maybe I’ll become Catholic like Mark Costello’ – his friend Mark. But I remember him sort of mocking me a little bit and saying that my conversion was bourgeois. I know he had a spiritual life, I know he prayed and meditated every day, but to my knowledge, I don’t think he ever had a formal spiritual practice. I really hope that

¹¹ Max indicates that it was Karr’s conversion to Catholicism that precipitated Wallace’s own interest in that particular faith tradition (166), although Karr herself seems to think, as this quote reveals, that it was Mark Costello’s faith, and not her own, that initially guided Wallace toward Catholicism.

he had a community, you know. I really hope he had a community at the time; I was never aware of that” (McGarvey). Karr’s remarks portray a deep insight into Wallace’s faith life; she identified something that Wallace himself would repeatedly return to in his work – the need for a community to support the individual in his or her spiritual life.

Wallace’s own words in his well-publicized (and eventually published) commencement speech at Kenyon College¹² (May 21, 2005) reflect something of the seeker mentality regarding faith. He does not argue for a specific belief system, but contends that individuals must be alert to the possibility that there is more to life than one’s “natural, hardwired default setting, which is to be deeply and literally self-centered, and to see and interpret everything through this lens of self” (*Water* 44). Wallace explicitly connects this default setting of self-centeredness with dogmatism, whether it is atheistic or religious in nature: “[the] religious dogmatists’ problem is exactly the same as the...atheist’s: arrogance, blind certainty, a close-mindedness that’s like an imprisonment so complete that the prisoner doesn’t even know he’s locked up” (32). If we were to read Wallace’s work informed solely by this account, then Wallace would fall into the category of a postsecular writer, rather than an explicitly Christian one. I use the term postsecular in the fashion of John McClure, who, in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison* (2007), defines it as “a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity” (ix). McClure’s work identifies a strand of contemporary fiction that attempts to portray a transcendent worldview without adhering to any specific religious sensibility. He writes

¹² The speech was eventually published as *This is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (2009).

that the hallmark of postsecular fiction is the depiction of “forms of faith...[that] are dramatically partial and open-ended” (x). Clearly, Wallace’s remarks in “This is Water” align him with McClure’s postsecular writers, and his fiction does have much in common with the works that McClure studies. It invokes a transcendent reality without overtly advocating for a specific religious worldview, but I contend that Wallace’s work is more productively understood in a specifically Christian context because, while his fiction does resist an easy recourse to dogmatism, the worldview that informs his work is shaped not by an undifferentiated appreciation of cosmic being but by a knowledgeable engagement with Christianity.

We can see how Wallace’s experience of a type of Christian community provides an important counter to his own innate irony and cynicism in “The View from Mrs. Thompson’s,” which is his account of watching 9/11 unfold in the home of a friend and neighbor whom he describes as being “a long-time church member and leader in our congregation” (*Consider* 135). Max, in his biography of Wallace, indicates that Mrs. Thompson was actually a member of Wallace’s “recovery group circle” and not part of any church congregation (Max 263), but what the piece reveals is that even if these neighbors were not part of a formal church community, Wallace envisioned them as functioning in his life in the way that a church would – they provide him with a community of faith that helps him get beyond his “default settings” by leading him to prayer. In this brief essay, originally published in *Rolling Stone* (Oct 25, 2001), Wallace writes about the need to share what he calls “the Horror” with other people; he writes, “Most of the people I know well enough to ask if I can come over and watch their TV are

members of my church. It's not one of those churches where people throw Jesus' name around a lot or talk about the End Times, but it's fairly serious, and people in the congregation get to know each other well and to be pretty tight" (*Consider* 135).

Tellingly, he reports on these church-going, lawn-mowing, flag-flying Midwesterners as an outsider, even though he, himself, is one of them (one of the most poignant moments in the piece is Wallace searching high and low for a place to buy a flag, and eventually making one out of construction paper and magic markers).

In his description of 9/11, as in so much of his fiction, Wallace is both inside the moment and outside of it, reporting about the events and his own reactions to them as they unfold. He reports on the growing "feeling of alienation from these good people that builds in me all throughout the part of the Horror where people flee rubble and dust. These ladies are not stupid, or ignorant. . . . What these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent. There is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room" (139). Although his community does not prevent him from feeling a sense of ironic distance regarding "the Horror" and its presentation as television spectacle, it does enable him to move beyond these feelings towards something more sincere. He writes that if he were alone he would give free reign to his personal cynicism, but instead, since he is in community, he joins with them in prayer. Rather than being cynical, or approaching the event from an ironic distance, what this community does is:

all sit together and feel really bad, and pray. No one in Mrs. Thompson's crew would ever be so nauseous as to try to get everybody to pray aloud or form a prayer circle, but you can still tell what they're all doing. Make no mistake, this is mostly a good thing. It forces you to think and do things you most likely wouldn't

alone, like for instance while watching the address and [the president's] eyes to pray, silently and fervently, that you're wrong about the president...and it's good, this is good to pray this way. It's just a bit lonely to have to. Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around. (140)

From this brief account it seems Wallace does not see himself as fully part of this decent, innocent community, and without a more detailed first-hand account of his personal beliefs it is impossible to claim Wallace as any sort of orthodox Christian, or even to establish that he believed in the existence of God, let alone the divinity of Jesus. But it is clear that he found organized religion, specifically the Christian Church, to be one viable place to position oneself when trying to deal with the problems of the modern world. And what becomes clear from reading Wallace's body of work is that he believed fiction could function in something like the way he described his faith community – as a way to get out of the isolated self – a way to “take something other than [the individual self] seriously.”

***Infinite Jest* as Diagnostic Novel**

A number of critics have noted the spiritual dimension of *Infinite Jest*, although none have explored Wallace's treatment of faith in this novel with any depth or specificity.¹³ The novel's focus on surrender and community are both central to Wallace's treatment of faith, as I will detail below, but the entire form of the novel is an instantiation of what Walker Percy termed the “diagnostic novel,” or work that shines a

¹³ Stephen Burn, in *David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest: A Reader's Guide* (2012), notes, “*Infinite Jest* may basically be a religious book. Although this might seem unlikely, it is clear that, on one level, the novel is about belief.” He then adds “the spiritual hollowness of a life without belief seems to be one of the most persistent themes” (63), but he does not explore this theme at any length. Other critics who have noted the novel's concern with religious issues include Adam Kelly, who observes that faith is one of the traits that Wallace “can approach...only through the frame of paradox” (139), and Thomas Tracy, who lists “spiritual despair” as one of addiction's “attendant ills” that pervades *Infinite Jest* (172). I contend Tracy has the order reversed, and that addiction is one of the results of the malaise of spiritual despair that permeates the novel.

light on the maladies afflicting modern consciousness. Percy articulates his understanding of the diagnostic novel in “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” where he writes:

In other times, the sense of wholeness and well-being of society, or least of much of educated society, outweighed the suspicion that something had gone very wrong, indeed. To the degree that a society has been overtaken by a sense of malaise rather than exuberance, by fragmentation rather than wholeness, the vocation of the artist...can perhaps be said to come closer to that of diagnostician rather than the artist’s celebration of life in a triumphant age. Something is indeed wrong, and one of the tasks of the serious novelist is, if not to isolate the bacillus under the microscope, at least to give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable. (*Signposts* 206)

Wallace, like Percy, is interested not just in depicting this malaise and fragmentation, but in trying to understand where it comes from and how it can be overcome, and for both authors both diagnosis and cure contain a spiritual element. Like Percy, Wallace writes about characters that are suffering from both physical and metaphysical ills, and he links these two conditions together. The illnesses and sicknesses are not simply pathologies, they are signs of deeper systemic problems in the social fabric and in the way the culture functions.

For Percy, malaise was the primary problem – the feeling that life lacks inherent meaning and value. His characters suffer from abstraction and a loss of focus, or what Charles Taylor describes as, “a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty, a multiform search for something within, or beyond it, which could compensate for the meaning lost with transcendence” (302). Wallace, though, identified more severe symptoms, and his diagnosis is more dire, although it still falls within the rubric of problems that Taylor identifies as part of modern civilization. Taylor writes, “the narratives of modernity encounter increasing doubt and attack in the nineteenth and

twentieth centuries. In part, this is because the actual achievements of civilization – industrial wastelands, rampant capitalism, mass society, ecological devastation – begin to look more and more questionable” (718). *Infinite Jest* is set in a dystopic future where the impacts of these “achievements” are magnified: the entire northeast portion of the United States has been turned into a toxic waste dump, which results in the production of a number of horrifying mutations, including “rapacious feral hamsters and insects of Volkswagen size and infantile gigantism” (573), and “mile high toddlers, skull-deprived wraiths, carnivorous flora, and marsh-gas that melts your face off” (670). This is sickness rendered grotesque, and, like O’Connor’s use of the grotesque, it points to deeper systemic problems in society that are being ignored.¹⁴ But Wallace is also interested in the ways this sickness is manifest in individual behaviors; he sees addiction – to drugs, alcohol, even entertainment – as the primary symptom of the age. The debilitating effects of addiction are rendered in explicit detail throughout the novel. The unifying thread of the novel revolves around a video, also titled *Infinite Jest*, which is so addictive that those who begin watching desire nothing more than to continue watching it until they die. Wallace depicts a society that attempts to self-medicate rather than address the deep, fundamental problems that need to be faced.

The paradigmatic illustration that something has gone horribly awry with this world is the diagnostic puzzle with which Wallace begins the novel: the case of Hal Incandenza. Hal is one of the two protagonists of *Infinite Jest* (the other is Don Gately, a

¹⁴ For more on the ways that Wallace’s depiction of the natural world reflects deeper systemic problems in America, see Graham Foster’s “A Blasted Region: David Foster Wallace’s Man-made Landscapes” in *Consider David Foster Wallace* (2010) and Heather Houser’s “*Infinite Jest*’s Environmental Case for Disgust” in *The Legacy of David Foster Wallace* (2012).

recovering addict who is a staff member at Ennet House, a halfway house for recovering addicts), and the only major character in the novel to provide first person narration. Significantly, although the reader is able to understand Hal's words, the specific nature of his physical malady, revealed to us in the opening scene of the novel (which is, somewhat confusingly, the last thing that happens in the book chronologically speaking), is that no one can understand what Hal is saying. Hal's interior monologue, which the reader encounters, is articulate almost to a fault, but for reasons that remain unexplained throughout the novel his attempts to communicate with other people have recently become not just unintelligible (he describes his most recent attempts to write down his thoughts as looking like "some sort of infant's random stabs on a keyboard" (9)), they are described as "*subanimalistic noises and sounds*" (14). One of the people who encounters Hal trying to communicate says, "I believe I've seen a vision of hell" (14); another describes Hal as "only marginally *mammalian*" (15). The reader is faced with an irresolvable juxtaposition between Hal's interiority, where he tells us, "I am not just a boy who plays tennis. I have an intricate history. Experiences and feelings. I'm complex...I'm not just a creatus, manufactured, conditioned, bred for a function...I am not what you see and hear" (12-13), and the way his words and actions come across to those who interact with him. By starting the novel with this scene, Wallace alerts the reader that something has gone terribly wrong but it is unclear, both to the people within the world of the novel and to us as readers, what exactly has happened, or why. It is evident, though, that the problem has something to do with the imprisonment of the self within one's own consciousness, or what Greg Carlisle describes as Hal's "retreat into

himself – his isolation,” which is a product of being part “of a culture that promotes self-obsession and discourages honest self-awareness” (481). Hal’s illness provides the primary symptoms for Wallace’s diagnosis of the modern condition.

In an interview Wallace pinpointed the problem with contemporary America as a “strong and distinctive American distaste for frustration and suffering” (*Conversations* 23). Wallace describes these conditions as “symptoms” of a much deeper problem, but he contends that contemporary Americans want to get “rid of the pain without addressing the deeper cause” (23), which in turn is connected to Americans’ penchant for seeking out some numbing pleasure, whether it is television or narcotics or popular fiction, rather than face the root causes of our displeasure. In a separate interview he was even more succinct: “In this country...we’re unprecedentedly safe, comfortable, and well fed, with more and better venues for stimulation. And yet if you were asked, ‘Is this a happy or unhappy country?’ you’d check the ‘unhappy’ box. We’re living in an era of emotional poverty” (*Conversations* 68). *Infinite Jest* focuses on addiction and consumerism because Wallace views them as primary symptoms of this ‘emotional poverty.’

The novel itself contains an explicit diagnosis of this problem, in the form of a series of metaphysical discussions between a French-Canadian terrorist, Remy Marathe, and a U.S. government secret agent, Hugh Steeply. Marathe (in somewhat stilted English) contends that the problem with America is that its citizens “choose nothing over themselves to love” and so would “die for this chance to be fed this death of pleasure” (318). For most Americans, there is no transcendent meaning, and so the greatest good becomes the escape from pain, and the pursuit of pleasure. But what the novel

demonstrates is that this pursuit of pleasure becomes crippling; the addicts in the novel have sought pleasure to the point where nothing else matters to them, and it destroys them. Marathe says that for most Americans, “your temple is self and sentiment. Then in such an instance you are a fanatic of desire, a slave to your individual subjective narrow self’s sentiments; a citizen of nothing... You are by yourself and alone, kneeling to yourself... In a case such as this you become the slave who believes he is free... You believe you would die twice for another but in truth would die only for your alone self, its sentiment” (108). And then he concludes, in words that echo the parable of the two builders from Matthew’s Gospel, “You in such a case have nothing. You stand on nothing. Nothing of ground or rock beneath your feet. You fall; you blow here and there... tragically, unvoluntarily, lost” (108). Although Marathe is not speaking from a Christian perspective, his diagnosis of the problems with American society contain a biblical resonance because it mirrors the Christian condemnation of a society that values pleasure as the highest good, and renounces concepts like sacrifice and suffering.

Infinite Jest, though, does not just diagnose the problem with contemporary America, it offers a solution, albeit a tenuous one. If addiction is the extreme endpoint of an errant worldview that seeks to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, it is worth considering how Wallace depicts the process of overcoming such addiction. A number of characters in the novel do just this through the help of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), specifically through the practice of surrendering one’s will to a higher power. This process is most clearly represented in the character of Don Gately, who overcomes his addiction to Demerol with the aid of AA, expressly by asking for help from a God he

does not believe in. One of the central tenets of AA is the belief in a higher power, and although Gately “didn’t have any God or J.C.-background” and “felt like a true hypocrite just going through the knee motions” of prayer, he learns that “it didn’t matter at this point what he thought or believed or even said. All that mattered was what he *did*” (466). And although he manifestly does not understand how or why this process of prayer works, it does work. He wonders, “how could some kind of Higher Power he didn’t even believe in magically let him out of the cage [of addiction] when [he] had been a total hypocrite in even asking something he didn’t believe in to let him out of a cage he had like zero hope of every being let out of?” (468). The process defies rational comprehension, but is effective nevertheless; it is an instantiation of faith. This scene manifests a central tenet of the Catholic imagination, which is that performing faith, via ritual, is foundational to the sacramental experience of Catholicism, but one need not understand, or even necessarily completely believe in, a sacramental rite in order for God’s grace to become manifest through it.

This conflict between what is rational and what is real is foregrounded in a conversation between the now-sober Gately and Geoffrey Day, a junior college professor and newly admitted house-guest at Ennet House. Day complains to Gately about the irrationality of AA, the fact that “the Program [is] riddled with these obvious and idiotic fallacies and reductia ad absurdum... There are things about this allegedly miraculous Program’s doctrine that simply do not follow. That do not cohere. That do not make anything resembling rational sense” (1002). Gately, who cannot match Day’s verbosity, can only respond that even if AA does not make sense, and does not satisfy intellectually,

it works. In particular, the surrender of one's will and volition to a higher power eventually contributes to the breakdown of the compulsive need for the addictive substance, at least in the experience of Gately and other long-time members of AA. Wallace shows that faith need not (perhaps cannot) be grounded in rationality, but acting on faith can have real world consequences that defy logical expectations. Or, as the omniscient narrator of the novel states, the experience of AA teaches you "that AA and NA and CA's 'God' does not apparently require that you believe in Him/Her/It before He/She/It will help you" (201), and "that God might regard the issue of whether you believe there's a God or not as fairly low on his/her/its list of things s/he/it's interested in re you" (205).

It is important to note that in Wallace's depiction, this experience of faith necessarily takes place in community. Gately only comes to ask the God he doesn't believe in to help him because other, more experienced members of AA encourage him to do so, just as Day will only ever surrender to this higher power because of Gately's encouragement. No one gets there alone. This is a central conceit of the novel and it serves as a stark contrast to the world of the addicts, where the search for, and consumption of, addictive pleasure is nearly always isolating. Wallace emphasizes how important it is to Hal to get high in secret, and to be alone while he does so (54); the *Infinite Jest* video is watched by various solitary individuals; in one of the novel's most intense and virtuosic pieces a young woman overdoses on cocaine while locked, alone, in a bathroom (240). Solitariness and isolation lead to despair, feeding the recursive

feedback loop of addiction.¹⁵ This is in contrast to the community found in AA, which, although not idealized (many of the residents of Ennet House are despicable people who treat each other miserably), can provide the support needed by individuals to overcome their crises.

This contrast between isolation/ despair and community/ faith is best represented in the set-piece that is also the novel's most explicit meditation on the existence of God. Towards the end of *Infinite Jest*, Wallace inserts a brief five-page back-story for an extremely minor character, Barry Loach, a trainer at Hal's tennis academy. Loach is identified as, "the youngest child of an enormous Catholic family, the parents of which were staunch Catholics of the old school of extremely staunch Catholicism" (967).¹⁶ In telling the parable-like story of Loach and his older brother, a Jesuit seminarian who, "suffered at age twenty-five a sudden and dire spiritual decline in which his basic faith in the innate indwelling goodness of men like spontaneously combusted and disappeared" (968), Wallace invokes "Alyosha and Ivan's conversations in the good old Brothers K" (969).¹⁷ Wallace, like Dostoevsky, is deeply invested in the question of human goodness, or lack thereof, and the connection between this lack and the presence, or absence, of God. Like Dostoevsky before him, Wallace is often better at depicting the fallen nature of

¹⁵ See N. Katherine Hayles's "The Illusion of Autonomy and the Fact of Recursivity: Virtual Ecologies, Entertainment, and *Infinite Jest*" for an excellent discussion of recursivity in the novel.

¹⁶ While the novel is rather light on engagements with specific religious traditions, the vast majority of faith-based references in the novel refer to Catholicism. There are 19 references to "Catholic" and "Catholicism," four for "Christian," three for "Protestant," three for "Jew" or "Jewish," and three for "Muslim" or "Islam." No specific Protestant denominations are referenced. Clearly, at the time he was writing the novel, Catholicism was the default religious denomination for Wallace.

¹⁷ See Jacob's "The Brothers Incandenza" (2007) for a thorough exploration of the connections between *Infinite Jest* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.

humanity than its redemptive qualities, but, just as Alyosha serves as Dostoevsky's evidence for innate human goodness and therefore manifests the presence of God, Mario Incandenza, Hal's older and physically damaged brother, represents the possibility of human decency, and thus the existence of God in the world.

Barry Loach's brother, in order to prove the lack of "basic human charity" in the world, challenges Barry to "make himself look homeless and disreputable and louse-ridden" and then to stand outside a T-station in Boston and ask passersby "just to touch him...[to] extend some basic human warmth and contact" (969). Perhaps unsurprisingly, no one will touch him, which only reinforces his brother's spiritual crisis, and initiates one in Barry as well. After nine months of being utterly shunned by society (clearly a significant amount of time, indicative of Barry's spiritual death and rebirth), Barry "was dangerously close to disappearing forever into the fringes and dregs of metro Boston street life" (970). He is saved from this self-erasure, and its attendant spiritual despondency, by the presence of Mario Incandenza, who is too innocent, and too good, to do anything except reach out and touch Barry – to extend to him the basic human dignity, and personal contact, that all other people have denied him. Mario's sympathetic touch breaks through Barry's isolation and starts a "kind of heartwarming and faith-reaffirming series of circumstances" that redeem Barry's life (971). This scene takes place ten pages from the end of the novel.

Infinite Jest lacks a traditional climax, and its conclusion provides no resolution. The scene of communion between Barry and Mario stands in stark contrast to the two scenes of pain, isolation and violence that conclude the novel. In the penultimate scene,

the oldest Incandenza brother, Orin, is trapped in a glass cage and tortured; the final scene of the novel depicts Don Gately's nadir, as he remembers being forcibly given a highly potent drug that leaves him feeling "less high than disembodied. It was extremely pleasant" (981). Gately's personal pleasurable feelings are wildly at odds with the extreme violence that is taking place in the room with him (one of Gately's drug dealing compatriots is having his eyelids sewn open, one of many allusions to *A Clockwork Orange*); the effect of the drug is to further isolate him from what is happening around him. By placing these moments in juxtaposition at the conclusion of the novel, Wallace demonstrates that being "disembodied," or losing one's sense of self, is the terminal symptom of his diagnosis. But, for Wallace, the prognosis is not completely hopeless. Gately is able to overcome his disembodied addiction by surrendering to a higher power; Barry Loach is able to avoid a similar death-in-life because Mario reached out to him. These are the twin pillars of Wallace's conception of transcendent significance in *Infinite Jest* – faithful surrender and the necessity of community support.

If, as the parable of Barry Loach illustrates, the end of isolation can lead to a rebirth of faith, then Wallace envisions his fiction as the equivalent of Mario's touch: a way to break through the prison of the ego. Wallace's work is powerful not simply because it identifies the problems of modern society, or even because it actively tries to offer a solution, but because it tries to *become* the solution. He told an interviewer, "We'd probably most of us agree that these are dark times... In dark times, the definition of good art would seem to be art that locates and applies CPR to those elements of what's human and magical that still live and glow despite the times' darkness" (*Conversations* 26). If

isolation and solipsism are key aspects of American malaise, then really reading and engaging with Wallace's fiction is an exercise in overcoming these problems.¹⁸ Wallace declared, "A big part of real art fiction's job is to aggravate this sense of entrapment and loneliness and death in people, to move people to countenance it, since any possible human redemption requires us to face what's dreadful, what we want to deny"¹⁹ (*Conversations* 32). What Wallace asks his readers to do is fully enter into the experience of his characters – not just read about, but to feel with; reading his work becomes an exercise in the spiritual discipline of compassion, from the latin 'cum passio,' to suffer with another.

As he states in "This Is Water," Wallace sees the modern individual as imprisoned by his or her own unquestioning self-consciousness. What Wallace wants to do in his fiction is help the individual out of this imprisonment, by exposing him or her to different ways of thinking and seeing the world. In the speech, he does not explicitly claim this as his fictional project, but he does say, "Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, *real*" (*Water* 41, emphasis in original). The heart of Wallace's aesthetic project is this communication of other people's interiority to the reader. He attempts to construct, via fiction, the type of

¹⁸ Daniel Turnbull's "*This is Water* and the Ethics of Attention: Wallace, Murdoch and Nussbaum" examines how Wallace's work enacts a process of moral formation for the reader, as his fiction "both show[s] us how attention and imagination may be used in ways that are essential for deeper moral responsiveness, and lead us to use our faculties in this way" (209). Turnbull notes that Wallace's work is not about "telling us what concrete actions we ought or ought not to be taking" but is rather about "stating that the way we choose to attend to and see situations is absolutely central to the way we react in the world" (216).

¹⁹ In this instance, Wallace is making an argument for the function of fiction that is very much in line with those made by O'Connor (see Chapter Two, pages 51-58), where she argues that the job of the writer was to make her vision of reality visible to her readers, even (perhaps especially) when that vision is focused on aspects of life that they would prefer not to see. Both Wallace and O'Connor believed that facing these "dreadful" aspects of existence, even in fiction, can be a transformative experience for the reader.

community that he views as necessary for the transcendence of self; he wants to point the reader beyond the pursuit of pleasure towards a more meaningful, and fulfilling, existential goal.

In his most explicit claim about faith in the modern world, Wallace claims that, “Everybody worships. The only choice we get is *what* to worship. And an outstanding reason for choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing to worship...is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive” (*Water* 100-02). As he so compellingly demonstrates in *Infinite Jest*, contemporary America is ruled by its “default settings,” by which he means unthinking devotions to the pursuit of pleasure. What he wants us to be able to see is that “there are other options” (92). In Wallace’s aesthetic, the central premise is that one must “learn how to pay attention,” because this type of focus becomes a window into the transcendent. He states that if an individual is able to actually get beyond his or her “default setting” then “it will actually be within [his/her] power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell-type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that lit the stars – compassion, love, the subsurface unity of all things” (93). He immediately qualifies this mystical vision by stating, “Not that that mystical stuff’s necessarily true: The only thing that’s capital-T True is that you get to *decide* how you’re going to try to see it” (94). Again, there is tension between objective truth and the subjective experience of it, but, in his fiction, particularly *The Pale King*, Wallace illustrates more of a commitment to the objective “capital-T Truth” of the mystical vision than one might expect.

“Capital-T Truth” in *The Pale King*

Infinite Jest, for all of its ‘elegant complexity’ (to borrow Gregory Carlisle’s term), contains a theological vision that is, in some ways, relatively simple: we are a fallen people, and the only thing that can help us in our fallen condition is surrendering to a God that surpasses all understanding (with the added dimension that we need community to help us make this surrender work). In *The Pale King*, Wallace’s treatment of faith is more complicated. Although *The Pale King* remains unfinished, it is possible to at least determine some parameters for where Wallace’s fictional project was headed. From the fragments that we have, it appears his central diagnosis of the modern condition remains fundamentally similar, but rather than focusing on the dramatic and extreme symptoms of disease and dis-ease that permeate the earlier novel, he shifts his attention instead to a more mundane, but, in his view, equally pernicious symptom: the restlessness at the heart of American cultural life. In conjunction with his exploration of the perils of humanity’s inability to tolerate boredom, Wallace takes up the idea of faith itself, and begins to explore how people come to embrace a horizon of transcendence, and what it means to really pursue, and participate in, a reality beyond biological determinism.

Most of the reviews of *The Pale King* focus on its treatment of the problem of boredom, but they fail to recognize the spiritual valence with which Wallace has invested this problem. Boredom is not simply a widespread societal problem that needs to be overcome, it is a symptom of a deeper crisis in the culture. Wallace’s characters struggle with their inability to focus on the work in front of them (an understandable problem, since they are IRS auditors), but Wallace is interested in more than simply the condition

of being distracted. As a novelist diagnostician, he is concerned with the root cause of this inability to focus. Just as Wallace used Hal's inability to communicate as the primary case study in *Infinite Jest*, he uses Lane Dean Jr.'s struggle with the debilitating boredom of his job at the IRS as the focal point of an exploration of the problem in *The Pale King*. Lane, who is Wallace's most explicitly Christian character and one whose story is central to the theological insights of the novel, is a relatively inexperienced auditor suffering "boredom beyond any boredom he had ever felt" (378), which is so extreme that he begins to contemplate all manner of suicide (including "ways to kill himself with Jell-O" (380)). In the midst of this existential crisis he is visited by one of the "two actual, non-hallucinatory ghosts haunting Post 047's wiggle room [where the auditors work]" (315), who begins to explain to Lane the etymology of the word boredom. The ghost introduces the concept of "*accidia*" which, he explains, was "made so much of by monks under Benedict... Also the hermits of third-century Egypt, the so-called *daemon meridianus*, when their prayers were stultified by pointlessness and tedium and a longing for violent death" (383). Since Lane, the committed Christian, was himself just longing for a violent death, and since debilitating boredom is one of the key themes of the novel, it is worth pursuing this concept of acedia in greater detail.

Acedia, as the ghost tells Lane, has a long history in Christian monastic tradition. Evagrius Ponticus (345-399), one of the early Christian monks and ascetics known as the Desert Fathers, described it thus:

The demon of acedia - also called the noonday demon - is the one that causes the most serious trouble of all. He presses his attack upon the monk about the fourth hour and besieges the soul until the eighth hour. First of all he makes it seem that the sun barely moves, if at all, and that the day is fifty hours long. Then he

constrains the monk to look constantly out the windows, to walk outside the cell, to gaze carefully at the sun to determine how far it stands from the ninth hour, to look now this way and now that to see if perhaps [one of the brethren appears from his cell]. Then too he instills in the heart of the monk a hatred for the place, a hatred for his very life itself, a hatred for manual labor. He leads him to reflect that charity has departed from among the brethren, that there is no one to give encouragement. . . . He depicts life stretching out for a long period of time, and brings before the mind's eye the toil of the ascetic struggle and, as the saying has it, leaves no leaf unturned to induce the monk to forsake his cell and drop out of the fight. (*Praktikos* 18-19)

The popular spiritual writer and poet Kathleen Norris's *Acedia and Me: A Marriage, Monks, and a Writer's Life* (2008) explores the history of acedia, as well as its present day manifestations. In a diagnosis of modern society that reads like a précis of the thematic concerns of *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, Norris claims, "Much of the restless boredom, frantic escapism, commitment phobia, and enervating despair that plagues us today is the ancient demon of acedia in modern dress" (3). The great twentieth century spiritual writer Thomas Merton arrived at a similar conclusion: "Acedia is in fact one of the great spiritual diseases of our time. In a sense it is a disease of the best minds. The intellectual elite is faced with despair because it sees the utter hollowness of the world that man has made for himself, and sees no hope for improvement. . . . Acedia is the disease which afflicts the whole world, especially the unbelieving world" (*Cassian* 185).

It is unclear how well versed Wallace was in the literature of the Desert Fathers, or if he had encountered any of the more contemporary literature that explored the phenomena of acedia, but *The Pale King* reads, in many instances, like a fictionalized dramatization of this condition as it is described by these theologians and spiritual masters. Indeed, it is evident that Wallace does not view acedia as a symptom of our current age, but rather as the primary pathologic condition. The symptoms originally

described by the Desert Fathers, and reinterpreted to the present day – listlessness; obsession with passive entertainment; the inability to focus or sit still; mindless eating, sleeping, or visiting with acquaintances; “chronic withdrawal from reality” – are the symptoms that permeate Wallace’s diagnostic novels.

It is even possible that the phantom who introduces the concept into *The Pale King* is supposed to be a literal figuration of the noonday demon.²⁰ He appears less than a page after a discussion of the movie *The Exorcist*, which alerts the reader to the concept of demons and possession. And although the phantom for the most part appears harmless and disinterested in human affairs, he reveals a different aspect when Lane’s coworker (a fellow wiggler) apprehends his presence. The ghost responds by making “his hands into claws and [holding] them out at the other wiggler like a demon or someone possessed. The whole thing happened too fast to almost be real to Lane Dean” (385). After revealing its true nature, the phantom/ demon then immediately returns to his disquisition on boredom, describing it as “*soul murdering*” (385, italics in original). Lane, as a devout Christian, responds as one of the Desert Fathers might have counseled: Wallace writes, “It occurred to Lane Dean that he might pray” (385). Directly on the heels of this invocation of prayer, the phantom leaves and Lane “let himself look up and [he] saw that no time had passed at all” (385).

²⁰ In a chapter 26 Wallace provides background on the department’s two ghosts. Based on the description of his rhythmic upper body movement and odd head-lamp, the ghost who visits Dean is almost surely Garrity, who had “evidently been a line inspector for Mid West Mirror Works in the mid-twentieth century” (315). Unlike the other ghost who “died at his desk unnoticed” and continues to companionably show up for work, Garrity embodies the endpoint for the misery of rote work: “In 1964 or 1965 he had apparently hanged himself from a steam pipe in what is now the north hallway off the REC Annex’s wiggle room” (316). That he is given an identity does not necessarily preclude the possibility that he is also an instantiation of the demon.

For Wallace, the way to overcome the problem of “soul murdering” boredom is not to hide from it, although as *Infinite Jest* demonstrates, many people do just this; rather, *The Pale King* at least hints at a solution found in the embrace of suffering, which is, of course, a very Christian solution to the problem. John Cassian, another Desert Father, writes:

When I was beginning my stay in the desert, and had said to Abbot Moses, the chief of all the saints, that I had been terribly troubled yesterday by an attack of accidie, and that I could only be freed from it by running at once to Abbot Paul, he said, ‘You have not freed yourself from it, but rather have given yourself up to it as its slave and subject. For the enemy will henceforth attack you more strongly as a deserter and runaway, since it has seen that you fled at once when overcome in the conflict: unless on a second occasion when you join battle with it you make up your mind not to dispel its attacks and heats for the moment by deserting your cell, or by the inactivity of sleep, but rather learn to triumph over it by endurance and conflict.’ Whence it is proved by experience that a fit of accidie should not be evaded by running away from it, but overcome by resisting it. (Chapter 25)

In the appendix of notes that concludes the novel, Wallace writes what might be a contemporary gloss on this passage: “It turns out that bliss – a second-by-second joy + gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious – lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (tax returns, televised golf), and, in waves, a boredom like you’ve never known will wash over you and just about kill you. Ride these out, and it’s like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Constant bliss in every atom” (546). Once again, Wallace’s description is strikingly similar to that of the Desert Fathers. Evagrius wrote that after the monk overcomes the noonday demon, “no other demon follows close upon the heels of this one (when he is defeated) but only a state of deep peace and inexpressible joy arise out of this struggle” (19). Wallace, like the Desert Fathers before

him, contends that if we can overcome acedia then we will come out the other side into a moment of transcendence. It is a beautiful vision, and it clearly seems that he is drawing on the traditions of Christian mysticism as a solution to what he viewed one of the central problems of our age.

The novel in fact points the reader toward this mystical tradition. Besides referencing early Christian monastic tradition, *The Pale King* includes a lengthy description of various Christian mystics. Chapter 36, which focuses on a young boy who seeks the ability “to press his lips to every square inch of his own body” (394), also includes a description of five reputed stigmatics. Wallace begins this section thus: “Facts: Italian stigmatist Padre Pio carried wounds which penetrated the left hand and both feet medially throughout his lifetime. The Umbrian St. Veronica Giuliani presented with wounds in one hand as well as her side, which wounds were observed to open and close on command” (398-99). He continues in the same clinical style, describing the wounds of Giovanna Solimani and St. Francis of Assisi (and, a few pages later, Therese Neumann), before concluding: “And yet (fact): Hands lack the anatomical mass required to support the weight of an adult human. ...Hence the, quote, ‘necessarily simultaneous *truth* and *falsity* of the stigmata’ that existential theologian E. M. Cioran explicates in his 1937 *Lacrimi si sfinite*, the same monograph in which he refers to the human heart as ‘God’s open wound.’” (399). Wallace foregrounds the myriad tensions inherent in the stigmata: it is demonstrably real, and yet the wounds cannot literally match Christ’s, since “classical crucifixion required nails to driven through subject’s wrists, not his hands” (399). Wallace is demonstrating that there are elements of even formal organized religion

that, like the alcoholic's surrender to the higher power in AA, defy rational explanation, and yet are still "capital-T true."

One of the difficulties in writing about an unfinished work is we do not know how Wallace envisioned all of the parts coming together, or even if all of these sections would have made the final cut. The chapter which includes the sections on the stigmatics does not seem to directly connect to the plot elements in the rest of the work – the identity of the boy at the center of the chapter remains unclear in relation to other named characters in the book – but there is a strong connection between these Christian mystics, who defy rationality not simply through their faith but in their very bodies, and the overall themes of the novel. The boy, in his single-minded desire to master his own body, demonstrates that such self-mastery is possible, although it would be a mistake to align his actions too closely to those of the stigmatics themselves. The boy explicitly "had no conscious wish to 'transcend' anything" (400), whereas stigmatics like Padre Pio and St. Francis receive the stigmata in connection to a life lived in service to God, and the wounds become a manifestation of a supernatural, transcendent reality.

The Pale King demonstrates that Wallace is not solely interested in the mystical elements of Christianity, though; he also explores the impact of a transcendent, and explicitly Christian, worldview on everyday life. He shows that such a belief structure can help overcome the paralysis, listlessness and fear of commitment that afflict modernity. We see how a transcendent worldview affects day-to-day decision making in Chapter 6 of *The Pale King* (originally published as "Good People" in *The New Yorker* on Feb 5, 2007). The main character of the story is none other than Lane Dean, Jr., the

same man who will eventually be so beset by acedia that he contemplates suicide. This story takes place a few years before he joins the IRS, and is framed entirely by his own internal thought processes as he and his girlfriend Sheri wordlessly contemplate aborting their accidental pregnancy. Both Lane and Sheri are evangelical Christians, the type of people who reference scripture in regular conversation and unapologetically talk about “turning a matter over to Jesus Christ in prayer,” language that Wallace accurately uses without irony or mockery (37). Despite his religious scruples, Lane’s initial desire is to ask Sheri to get an abortion. This desire, though, renders him unable to act; he is emotionally, spiritually, even physically frozen by this unforeseen challenge; throughout the story, Lane is “very still and immobile” (36). There is almost no physical movement in the story, which reflects his internal paralysis. This crisis brings about an extreme form of the symptoms of acedia. The Cistercian monk Michael Casey links acedia to “the vice of noninvolvement” which he describes as “endemic in the Western world” (57). He describes the acediac as “a person without commitment, who lives in a world characterized by...the effective denial of the validity of any external claim” (57). Lane struggles with just this inability to form a personal commitment, and his desire to deny the validity of Sheri’s claim on him leaves him feeling like he is “freezing more and more solid” (38). Although Lane “knew something was required of him and knew it was not this terrible frozen care and caution,” he cannot bring himself to act. Like the acediac, he cannot communicate with his God: “He tried to pray but could not” (38).

The story turns, though, as Lane experiences what he calls a “*moment of grace*” (42, emphasis in original), in which he is able to actually get inside his girlfriend’s head

for a moment and see their predicament from her eyes. This leads him to a true insight into love: “Why is one kind of love any different? What if he has no earthly idea what love is? What would even Jesus do?...What if he was just afraid, if the truth was no more than this, and if what to pray for was not even love but simple courage, to meet both her eyes...and trust his heart” (43). What Wallace dramatizes here is that a worldview informed by Christianity is capable of getting the isolated individual out of his own head and enabling him to reach out and to feel someone else’s pain and anxiety; it helps him break through his emotional and spiritual paralysis. For Wallace, who repeatedly dramatizes that one of the great failures of our modern age is the inability to get outside of the self long enough to act meaningfully in the world, it is certainly significant that it is his Christian character who is able to make this leap, and show this empathy in action.²¹

Lane Dean, Jr., though, is not the only character in *The Pale King* able to actively transcend his own ego in service to another. In the last major set-piece before the conclusion of the novel, Shane Drinion is shown to be the embodiment of empathy. As he listens to his coworker Meredith Rand relate her life story, he is so totally engrossed in actively listening to her and attempting to fully understand what she is telling him that he actually begins to levitate off of his chair. Wallace offers no explanation for Drinion’s levitation, the narrator simply states, “Drinion is actually levitating slightly, which is what happens when he is completely immersed” (485). By the end of Rand’s story, Drinion is “1.75 inches off the chair seat” (498). In a novel that has already referenced

²¹ Of course, as his later encounter with the demon/ phantom demonstrates, this Christian perspective is no protection against acedia, the spirit of the age, but the Desert Fathers were far more committed Christians than Lane Dean (or most other people) and they were particularly beset. I do think, though, that Wallace has Lane in particular struggle so mightily in order to demonstrate that Christianity in and of itself is not some sort of magical protection against a problem that Wallace saw as endemic.

the supernatural capacities of the mystics, Drinion's quasi-mystical ability to levitate connects him with the metaphysical abilities of the saints. Wallace is drawing a direct connection between the ability to remain focused (Drinion's most remarkable quality is the ability to give "whoever's speaking his complete attention" (448)) despite the myriad distractions of life, and a horizon of transcendence. It is a somewhat curious connection to make, unless one is willing to grant that Wallace's diagnosis of the modern condition is correct – that our inability to overcome, or even countenance, *acedia*, is undermining our very cultural life. If this is the case, then Drinion's capacity to focus really is akin to the mystics' ability to transcend empirical understanding; it points us towards a whole new horizon of understanding.

Unfortunately, but perhaps not surprisingly, Drinion is the novel's least interesting character. Unlike the other characters who struggle with their faith and beliefs, or even those who lack faith altogether and are somewhat adrift, Drinion is static, and thus there is no way for the reader to enter into his experience. Wallace wants to hold Drinion up as an example for the modern age – in the notes at the end of the novel we read Wallace's description of the character: "Drinion is *happy*" (546), which is a stark contrast to Wallace's other characters. But it is impossible for the reader to fully identify with Drinion because he lacks an interior life. All of his comments are directed back to Meredith Rand, reframing her thoughts and statements so as to clarify what she is thinking; Drinion's careful attention helps make Rand, in Jonathan Raban's words, "the single most interesting person in the book." While I disagree with this characterization of Rand, I do think Drinion's focused attention helps make her more interesting and

dynamic. At the same time, it makes Drinion himself less relatable, and thus less interesting.

Drinion's character demonstrates a conundrum of the diagnostic novel: the characters who have managed to overcome the disease, or to not get sick in the first place, are the ones we least want to read about. What is of interest to readers is both the sickness itself (because we can identify with this), and the process of overcoming the disease (because this gives us a model for how healing is possible). Fortunately, *The Pale King* does contain a powerful depiction of this process of overcoming dis-ease, and it is the most memorable scene in the novel.

Wallace is interested in the phenomenology behind the process of coming to live a life in service to a transcendent reality,²² and he addresses this directly in Chapter 22, which is the emotional center of the novel. This chapter is a long (98 page) monologue by Chris Fogle, a young man who describes his younger self as, "the worst kind of nihilist – the kind who isn't even aware that he's a nihilist...My essential response to everything was 'Whatever'" (154). Although he does not use the word, Fogle clearly was in the grip of acedia; he spends his days passively watching (significantly) *As the World Turns*, "being feckless [and] a wastoid," and working only at affecting a pose of "directionless drifting and laziness" (222-223). Fogle claims, "I was, in a way, too free...I was free to

²² Wallace also addressed the phenomenology of belief in the short story "All That," published in *The New Yorker* 12/14/09, which was part of the manuscripts for *The Pale King* but ultimately not included in the published version of the novel. The story is a beautiful evocation of childhood belief in supernatural reality, which the adult narrator connects to the "religious feeling that has informed most of [his] adult life." As in the other treatments of religion found in *The Pale King*, the story foregrounds the tension between belief in the supernatural and a commitment to "reason, skepticism, intellect, empirical proof, human autonomy, and self-determination"; and, as in the rest of the novel, Wallace leaves this tension unresolved, but the narrator's own account points toward a transcendent reality.

choose ‘whatever’ because it didn’t really matter. But that this, too, was because of something I chose – I had somehow chosen to have nothing matter” (223). This awareness corresponds to the Christian position on freedom, which is that true freedom is not the ability to choose just anything, but rather the ability to choose for the good.²³ Fogle comes to see that he has structured his life such that there is no real possibility to choose anything good, because his worldview does not allow for anything to have any inherent value. He concludes, “if I wanted to matter – even just to myself – I would have to be less free, by deciding to act in some definite way” (224). He realizes that he needs to actively resist the grip of acedia. The rest of the chapter details how, exactly, he is able to actually accomplish this.

What makes Fogle’s narrative so compelling is the style that Wallace uses to relate it to the reader. Fogle acknowledges, “the conscious intention of confronting major questions like ‘*Am I currently happy?*’ or ‘*What, ultimately, do I really care about and believe in?*’” is usually a fruitless exercise, because “the questions often end up not answered but more like beaten to death, so attacked from every angle and each angle’s different objections and complications that they end up ever more abstract and ultimately meaningless than when you first started” (191). But if Fogle (and by extension, Wallace) is right that we cannot address such questions directly, then how do we answer them? Fogle says he answered them “by accident,” when he wandered into the wrong classroom by mistake and ended up listening to a Jesuit priest deliver a life changing lecture, or

²³ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Section 1, Chapter 1, Article 3: ‘Man’s Freedom’: “As long as freedom has not bound itself definitively to its ultimate good which is God, there is the possibility of choosing between good and evil...The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of the good.”

sermon, about (of all things) accounting, but, significantly, his account of this accidental encounter is preceded by a conversion narrative given by a born-again Christian, who gives Fogle her ‘witness’ account “of how she was ‘saved’ or ‘born again’ and became a Christian” (211). Wallace has Fogle recount both the girl’s conversion and his own reaction to it, and although Fogle dismisses her account it leaves him feeling “somewhat lost and desolate inside” (214).

Fogle comes to recognize that even though he finds the girl’s conversion narrative “stupid and dishonest,” this “does not mean the experience she had in the church that day didn’t happen, or that its effects on her weren’t real” (214). Once again, Wallace circles around to the questions of ‘capital-T Truth,’ reality, and faith. Just because the girl’s story sounds overly familiar²⁴ does not mean that it is untrue; conversion stories are, for the most part, only radical and innovative to the ones who are experiencing them. Having Fogle acknowledge this fact preempts the reader’s own dismissal of such conversion narratives, which [perhaps] allows the reader to hear and respond to Fogle’s own account with less cynicism. This is important because Chapter 22 is, essentially, Fogle’s own conversion narrative (although, to be clear, his is not a conversion to Christianity, it is a conversion to an account of human experience and meaning that transcends biological determinism). The careful reader notes a number of parallels between the Christian girl’s

²⁴ Wallace could not have written a more conventional conversion narrative: the young woman, feeling “totally desolate and lost and nearly at the end of her rope” somewhat miraculously finds herself in “the parking lot of what turned out to be an evangelical Christian church, which by coincidence happened to be right in the middle of holding an evangelical service” (212). The girl enters the church and the pastor announces that, ““There is someone out there with us in the congregation today that is feeling lost and hopeless and at the end of their rope and needs to know that Jesus loves them very, very much”” (212). This moment of identification – of someone recognizing exactly what she is feeling, and giving it a name – makes her feel “completely reassured and unconditionally known and loved,” and gives her life “meaning and direction” such that “she had not had a down or empty moment since” (212). Of course, it is just this sort of identification of alienation that Wallace’s own work seeks to enact.

story and Fogle's own. Fogle contends that, "sudden, dramatic, unexpected, life-changing experiences are not translatable or explainable to anyone else" (214), but Wallace surely places the Christian girl's account before Fogle's own to establish a parallel between Fogle hearing her account and the reader hearing Fogle's. We, as the audience, might dismiss any connections between these stories and our own experiences, just as Fogle does, but that does not mean such connections are not there.

While life-changing conversion moments are undeniably idiosyncratic and personal, they do rely on, in Fogle's words, "everything in your previous life-experience that has led up to it and made you exactly who and what you are when the experience hits you" (214), which, for Fogle, although he does not acknowledge it, clearly includes his having heard the Christian girl's witness.²⁵ By extension, our having heard both the girl's story and Fogle's own account means that we have now become, in Fogle's words, "primed" – just as Fogle was. Perhaps we, as readers, recognize parts of ourselves in Fogle's account of his aimless youth (just as Fogle identified with aspects of the girl's story), and perhaps we will find his account of discovering meaning and value in some system beyond his own personal wants and desires to be compelling. If this is the case, then we have come around to an indirect consideration of the 'big questions' that Fogle

²⁵ Significantly, Fogle's pre-conversion experience also included a moment of traumatic violence, which follows the pattern established in the Catholic novels discussed earlier in this study. When Fogle tries to assess why he changed his life, he links the "dramatic experience I underwent in the Advanced Tax review class I sat in on by mistake" to his "father's accident" (191). Fogle then describes, in extended detail, how his father "was killed unexpectedly in a subway accident" when he got caught in a closing train door and was dragged into a tunnel (199). Fogle's account of this accident and its effects stretches for seven pages, allowing the reader to witness how significant, and traumatic, this was for Fogle. Its position in the narrative, right before Fogle hears the Christian girl's witness and then the Jesuit's lecture, connects these events in a fashion that we are, by this point in this study, very familiar with. Fogle's own version of his life story provides a template for the fundamental dimensions of his conversion experience, in which the moment of violent trauma is followed by receptivity to a new way of seeing and understanding the world.

says are the most important ones, but also the ones that cannot be tackled head on.

Wallace's techniques of narrative digression, or piling stories within stories, and of self-reflexive awareness, of drawing attention to the inherent falseness of some aspects of these conversion accounts, all prepare the reader to actually hear them, and to respond to them, in a way that we might not be otherwise able to do. In this sense, *The Pale King* is not only a diagnostic novel, it is also an attempt at a cure.

While *The Pale King* is clearly an unfinished work, it does contain a complete diagnosis of the modern condition (acedia), a description of how to overcome this condition that also doubles as an attempt at a cure enacted on the reader (Fogle's conversion story), and a depiction of what life looks like for those able to transcend the condition (in the stories of young Lane Dean, Jr. and Drinion). What is remarkable about *The Pale King* is the strongly Christian element in both diagnosis and cure. While Christian themes were evident in Wallace's earlier work, they are much more overt in this, his last novel. As Wallace continued to hone his ability to, in Percy's words, "render the unspeakable speakable," and thus help his readers to face the "entrapment and loneliness and death" that they would rather not acknowledge, he apparently found the transcendent worldview of Christianity to be one, although surely not the only, effective counter to the dis-ease of the culture. Thus, while Wallace was not an orthodox Christian believer, his work does manifest a sensibility profoundly influenced by his engagement with the Christian tradition. As such, his fiction will continue to stand as one of our most powerful testaments to the tensions and anxieties, but also the hopes, of the religious imagination in contemporary America.

EPILOGUE

I had settled on the title for this dissertation – “not peace but the sword” – before I had written a word of it. I knew that I was going to write about violence and faith, and of the most striking moments in the Gospels where Jesus speaks about the relationship between violence and faith, Flannery O’Connor had already co-opted one (Matthew 11:12: “And from the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away” (*Douay-Rheims Bible*)). But I was drawn toward a different passage from Matthew anyway, Matthew 10:34, in which Jesus tells his disciples, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace upon the earth. I have come to bring not peace but the sword” (*New American Bible*). I found that this passage captures the essence of what we find in much of twentieth century Catholic literature. While an individual might be inclined to think that the turn toward religious belief will bring peace and comfort, Jesus advises his followers that this is not the case. Catholic literature reflects this position – violence can lead one to belief, and the embrace of belief can, in turn, lead to pain, suffering, and even death.

Perhaps no one captured the divisiveness of Christianity as well as Graham Greene, whose early novels often demonstrate the ways in which a turn toward God can lead to separation from one’s previous, comfortable way of living (think of the whisky priest going to his death in order to fulfill his priestly duty, or Sarah Miles abandoning the happiness she had with Bendrix and eventually dying as a result of the actions she

undertakes after her conversion). This dynamic is also present in the work of Flannery O'Connor; Hazel Motes, Old Tarwater and Francis Marion Tarwater all manifest a violent Christian sensibility that isolates them from society. In recent Catholic literature, though, Catholic writers have focused more on the violence which leads to conversion than on the violence that comes about afterward. In the work of Tim Gautreaux, Alice McDermott and Annie Dillard, those who turn toward God seek, and often find, peace and community as a result. Ron Hansen's *Mariette in Ecstasy* does contain some of the elements of the disruptive nature of faith; he depicts Mariette's stigmata as a sort of violent intrusion that disrupts the harmony of the religious community and divides the sisters. But in contemporary Catholic literature, this novel is a bit of an outlier. In the post-Vatican II moment, the Church emphasizes a turn toward the world, not a violent rupture from it, and so the "sword" in contemporary Catholic literature is most often the one that is prodding the individual to seek out a transcendent presence. At the same time, contemporary Catholic novels are less likely to focus on the experience of explicitly, or exclusively, Catholic belief. As discussed in previous chapters, while some of the characters in recent Catholic literature are indeed Catholic, Catholic writers in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries turn their imaginations less toward how the rituals and practices of Catholicism affect one's worldview and more toward how a worldview shaped by Catholicism affects one's actions. But there are novels that do focus explicitly on the experience of being a believing and practicing Catholic in the contemporary moment, and I want to conclude this study by looking briefly at one such novel.

In Gregory Wolfe's defense of the contemporary literature of belief, "Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World: The myth of secularism triumphant in the arts is just that—a myth," Wolfe holds up the 2012 novel *What Happened to Sophie Wilder*, by Christopher Beha, as a manifestation of "faith found in literature." He mentions that the critic D.G. Myers, writing in *Commentary* magazine, declared that the novel "includes what is perhaps the best conversion scene in an English-language novel since *The End of the Affair*." Myers notes that the novel focuses on a young woman's conversion to Roman Catholicism after reading, among other Catholic works, Thomas Merton's *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Intrigued, I went to find out a bit about Christopher Beha, and the Catholicity of his novel.

Within the first few minutes of his appearance on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross, Beha stated, "I'm interested in religion as a challenge and, you know, Jesus bringing, as he says, not peace but the sword. And so I had an idea of having a character who is converted, but that conversion doesn't necessarily lead to peace, doesn't end her struggle but rather leads to a new struggle." While I think this idea of "not peace but the sword" is present in much of Catholic literature, Beha was the first author I found who mentioned it explicitly. Flannery O'Connor, quoting Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, wrote that everything that rises must converge, and this Beha quote struck me as a surprising point of convergence, bringing together the themes of this dissertation with a contemporary writer who was being championed as a new voice in the realm of the literature of belief. I sat down to read his novel and to find out how he depicted the struggle of conversion, and to see what sort of religious imagination was present in his fiction.

One thing that becomes evident upon reading the novel is Beha's debt to Greene; *What Happened to Sophie Wilder* is very much a re-imagination of the themes of *The End of the Affair* (1951). As in Greene's novel, the male protagonist is a writer who is in love with a woman who, unbeknownst to the man, converts to the Catholic Church; in both novels, the male is a non-believer who does not understand why the woman has left him, and who undertakes a journey to win the woman back and, in the process, is thereby introduced to some aspect of the power of belief. At the conclusion of *The End of the Affair*, Sarah has died from an infection but is working miracles from beyond the grave, and Bendrix has come to believe that God is real, although he wants God to leave him alone. In the last lines of the novel he prays, "O God, You've done enough, You've robbed me of enough, I'm too tired and old to learn to love, leave me alone forever" (160). The reader is left to wonder whether God will grant this prayer, or if Bendrix will come, like Sarah, to learn to love. At the end of *What Happened to Sophie Wilder*, the female protagonist, Sophie, is also dead, but she has committed suicide; it is unclear if the male protagonist, Charlie Blakeman, has come to believe in God, but he concludes the novel by writing a different ending to Sophie's story, one in which she decides to join a convent rather than kill herself. The last word of the novel is "redeemed" (253), which signals Charlie's hope that there can be a sort of salvation for Sophie after all. From these initial parallels, it seems as though Beha has written a contemporary take on Greene's themes, and has thus crafted a twenty-first century Catholic novel. I contend that he has not, and I want to spend some time explaining why.

Beha has written an evocative, probing novel about religious belief in the contemporary moment, and he writes perceptively about the Catholic Church. Unlike many of the authors I study here, one of Beha's primary themes within the novel is Catholicism itself – what it feels like to be a believer, and what this belief might cost. He takes the question of conversion very seriously, and his depiction of Sophie's conversion might well be the best conversion scene in contemporary English literature, if one requires that such a conversion scene lead the individual to membership in a formal church community. But, all the same, I do not think that *What Happened to Sophie Wilder* is actually a Catholic novel at all, because his work does not, in the end, reflect a Catholic view of existence. The world of the novel is not sacramental, and what hope there is for redemption within this world is not found in the embrace of either transcendent or immanent grace. The novel ends on what some readers might consider a redemptive note, but this moment of hope is purely literary, not religious. Sophie is, undoubtedly, dead; the chapter of the novel that concludes with her entering the convent is, like the stories told by the narrator of Alice McDermott's *Child of My Heart*, simply a narrative told by an individual in an attempt to make some sense of a senseless death.

The novel's depiction of Catholicism can be traced to Beha's own engagement with this religious tradition. Although he no longer identifies as a believing Catholic, he grew up Catholic, and being Catholic clearly meant more to him than simple religious identification. This is something he has repeatedly stated in interviews: "I wasn't merely 'raised' Catholic in a default sense; I was a believing Catholic, and it was important to me" (Giraldi); "I am someone who was raised Catholic and was indeed a believing

Catholic - not just sort of a cultural Catholic by upbringing - who then lost his faith” (Gross). When William Giraldi asked Beha, “how does Catholicism – how does belief or the lack of belief – inform your own life and work?” Beha responded, “On some level the answer is that it informs it completely. The problem of faith is the problem for me. It preoccupies me far more now than it did when I was a believer, perhaps because it wasn't a problem then but merely a fact.” *What Happened to Sophie Wilder* reflects this serious engagement with the question of faith and belief, and Beha manages to make the problem of faith meaningful and relevant, but within the novel belief is, in the end, finally only a problem that must be overcome.

Beha provided critic Alex Shephard with a more detailed description of his understanding of the Catholic Church: “my background is Catholic. Not a practicing Catholic or a believing Catholic, but I am very moved still by the structure of the church.” He goes on to describe the importance of “the hierarchy, the structure, and the tradition of [the Catholic Church]. Those are things that are interesting to me that I struggle with, that are appealing to me in a lot of ways.” In interviews, he speaks easily and knowledgeably about Catholic tradition, doctrine, sacraments and rituals. He is able to speak not merely about the cultural aspects of being a Catholic, but about what it is like to be a participating, believing Catholic.

Beha sounds most like the Catholic authors I study when he starts speaking about the relationship between Catholicism and mystery. He could be channeling Flannery O'Connor or Walker Percy when he says, “I think what it [going to church] does is, first of all, offer a way to resist materialism and scientific determinism and second, it gives

you a way to keep in touch with the fundamental mystery of the world” (Shephard), or “I remain suspicious of scientific materialists who insist that there is no underlying mystery, that the sense of mystery is some kind of cognitive holdover from a time when science had not yet explained human existence” (Gibaldi). But while Beha gestures toward this mystery, one way that the novel ultimately differs from the novels of O’Connor or Percy is that it fails to bring this mystery to life. We can see this in the language Beha uses to describe Sophie’s moment of conversion, which takes place during a Catholic mass:

It is in the nature of what happened next that it can’t be conveyed in words. The few times Sophie tried to explain it later, even to herself, she fell back on cliché: something came over her; she walked out changed. It got closest to it to say that she was, for a time, occupied. After all her reading in the week leading up to that day, she thought of that occupying force as the Holy Spirit. But mostly she knew that it was something outside of herself, something real, not an idea or a conceit or a metaphor. Once it passed on, she knew that her very outline had been reshaped by it, that this reshaping had long been awaited though she hadn’t recognized as much. More than that, she knew that she wanted the feeling back. She would chase it forever if need be. (113)

Beha’s gesture toward an indescribable feeling as the essence of Sophie’s faith is indicative of a weakness of the novel; while it may very well be impossible to depict what the experience of faith is like, *What Happened to Sophie Wilder* can only point the reader toward a vague feeling. There is no point in the novel where the reader understands Sophie’s faith on any deeper level than this. It remains ineffable, and, as such, it is largely unrecognizable.

Beha’s novel presents me with a conundrum. He certainly has a more extensive engagement with Catholicism than David Foster Wallace, and he is at least as well versed in the Catholic literary tradition (from reading Beha’s essays and interviews it is clear that he is very well versed in this tradition indeed, mentioning O’Connor, Greene, Waugh

and Spark, as well as more fundamental Catholic thinkers “from Paul to Augustine to Ignatius Loyola to Thomas Merton” (Tin House)). But while I find Wallace’s fiction to have surprising resonances with the Catholic tradition, what stood out for me while reading Beha’s work was the way that it seemed to lack something essential in its treatment of faith. I do not think this is simply because Beha left the Catholic Church and is therefore not a believer. Annie Dillard left the Church, but her last novel still reflects a Catholic worldview. Beha’s novel does not. To be fair to Beha, he never claimed that he set out to write a Catholic novel, so it would be a mistake to fault him for not writing one. I do think it is illuminative, though, to take a moment to understand why a novel about a young woman converting to Catholicism does not fit the criteria for a Catholic novel that I have been laying out throughout this project.

One reason for this is largely attributable to the way Beha structured the novel, and is therefore, perhaps, deliberate. The novel alternates between chapters narrated in the first person by young New York novelist Charlie Blakeman, and chapters told in third person limited point of view, which follow Sophie, Blakeman’s one-time girlfriend. It is within these Sophie chapters that we learn about the reasons for her conversion to Catholicism, and what her experience of Catholicism is like. What we come to learn by the end of the book, though, is that these chapters are also being written by Charlie, who, after Sophie commits suicide, attempts to retell her story, to figure out what actually happened to her, and to imagine a better, more hopeful end to her story.

Charlie, unlike Sophie, is not religious. He was “raised more or less Catholic” and had “gone to Catholic school [his] whole life” but “couldn’t quite take it seriously” (138).

Charlie is representative of many contemporary Catholics (and members of many other church communities as well); he periodically goes to mass to please his family, but the rituals lack significance for him. For him, “religion [was] an inheritance, a family tradition” (139), but he lacks the capacity for deep religious feeling. Since this is the case, when he attempts to inhabit Sophie’s thought processes, both during her conversion experience and afterward, we come against the limits of his own non-religious imagination. Her conversion experience reads much more like something out of a book than something deeply felt or experienced. The reader does not really get a sense of what has happened to Sophie, even after Charlie tells it to us. We know she converts, and that her experience of conversion is similar to the pattern established in so many of these Catholic novels, in which a moment of violence or trauma is followed by a turn toward a religious conception of existence. In Sophie’s case, her first trauma was when both of her parents died in a car crash while she was in high school, and this experience led to her initial conversion to the act of writing as a way of ordering and making sense of experience. Her conversion to Catholicism, though, is also preceded by violence; after she breaks up with Charlie, which was itself a traumatic event, she suffers a miscarriage, and it is this moment that is an integral part of her conversion. She finds some meaning in the event by connecting her loss to the experience of Job: “If she’d not read those words [from Job] in her dorm room that day, the experience at Beth’s church might have become an odd memory rather than the thing that changed her life. As she sat weeping, she thought of the child she’d lost” (146). This moment of identification with the suffering believer becomes a part of her Catholic identity.

After her conversion, she searches, mostly without success, for some sense of the spiritual fulfillment that precipitated her conversion. Her husband leaves her but that she will not consider a divorce because it is not allowed by the Church. She decides to go and live at her father-in-law's apartment to care for him in his final illness, even though she has never met him before and her husband has just abandoned her. She does it out of a sense of duty, but also a sort of spiritual pride. In the end, she ends up fulfilling the dying man's wishes by providing him with a fatal dose of medication. Soon thereafter she kills herself, perhaps out of guilt over what happened with her father-in-law, or because she has ceased to imagine a future for herself. She, like Charlie, is a writer, but she has given up creative writing in favor of writing grants for charitable organizations, and while in a different novel this might signify the putting into practice of her faith through the embrace of service oriented work, we never get the sense that this work is anything but isolating for her. Like caring for her father-in-law, it is something she undertakes out of a (perhaps misguided) sense of Catholic duty, and this is a good entry point into what I find most troubling about the depiction of faith within this novel. While the novel does a fair job of portraying the struggles that surround the process of coming to believe, it is less successful in depicting what the life of faith is like in action; within the world of the novel, faith is only a burden and obligation; it lacks anything inherently redemptive or transformative. We see her carrying out "her daily rituals...the form of faith" (113), without any sense that these rituals or forms have done anything to transform her interior disposition.¹

¹ In this sense, the novel manifests the inverse of the claims made by those scholars of religion discussed by Amy Hungerford, who contend that it is "naïve...[and] old-fashioned" to ask about belief, and that the

Throughout the third person chapters, we see Sophie performing some of the actions of faith – she stops into a church where the mass is in Spanish, where “the combination of familiarity and strangeness returned Sophie for the first time in years to the shocked grace she’d felt on that day when everything changed” (179) – but while the narrator tells us she occasionally feels some stirring of grace, we do not get the sense that Sophie’s conversion has done something meaningful inside of her. Sarah Miles, in *The End of the Affair*, renounces her old life, and struggles over what she has done and what it means; we are able to see this because Greene provides us with passages from her journal. Sophie’s struggles happen largely off the page, so we do not know what they are, if they happen at all.

We know that she is undergoing internal turmoil because in Charlie’s narration he tells us that she commits suicide by taking an overdose of pain medication, the same medication she gave to her father-in-law. But even as we read the chapters that follow Sophie’s point of view, we do not understand what is happening to her; we merely watch as she becomes increasingly isolated and boxed in by the choices that she makes. In this, the novel is actually reminiscent of another Greene novel, *The Heart of the Matter* (1948), in which Greene portrays the conflict between religious scruples and individual action. *The Heart of the Matter* follows a Catholic convert, Scobie, through his own journey of pity, pride, mortal sin, despair and ultimately suicide; Greene said the novel was about the “disastrous effect on human beings of pity as distinct from compassion”

proper way to approach the topic of religion is by looking at religious practice and observance (Hungerford 109). Beha’s novel attempts to reveal Sophie’s faith primarily by detailing her religious practices, but this approach does not allow the reader to comprehend what she really believes, or why she believes it, and thus we remain at a distance from her experience of belief. See above, Chapter Four, pages 178-80 for a more detailed discussion of this topic.

(*Ways of Escape* 93). Scobie's pity leads him to commit a number of acts that he knows are wrong, and he cannot bring himself to seek absolution, choosing instead to secretly poison himself rather than deliberately hurt his wife. Greene's novel is a brutal one, devoid of any real hope. Beha's tracks a similar course.

These comparisons to Greene's work are illuminative. Although *What Happened to Sophie Wilder* is the most recently written novel that I discuss, in its conception of faith and conversion it reflects a very pre-Vatican II mindset, in which the primary drama of the novel concerns an isolated sinner and her relationship with a transcendent Other, rather than about community and finding God's presence in aspects of the secular world. Despite the contemporary setting, Sophie's post conversion life does not seem in any way vibrant, or contemporary. Sophie joins the Catholic Church in college, but she avoids the Catholic community on campus; there is no sense that she has become part of a vital faith community after graduation, either. Beha depicts her sincere belief and religious commitment as being something outside of time, as if no one really acts and believes as Sophie does in the modern age.²

This tendency reaches its nadir in the second half of the book, in which Sophie utterly rejects the world at large. This part of the novel reads like a pseudo-morality play, in which the young faith-filled convert is forced to do battle, in isolation, with a suffering man who hates God and his own life. Sophie rejects all help, from neighbors, hospice

² Charlie Blakeman says exactly this: "when Sophie spoke about saving Crane's soul, I saw that her faith had nothing to do with sensibility. She believed. Another challenge: I hadn't thought such a thing was still possible" (140). It makes perfect sense for someone like Charlie to think this way, but the flaw in the novel is that the alternate point of view – Sophie's believing one – does not get equal treatment; the novel fails to make Sophie's post-conversion life seem viable because we are never allowed to see why someone would really believe in the manner that Sophie apparently does.

workers and home-healthcare aids, so that she can be alone with this man to whom she is only tangentially connected, and this serves as a sort of referendum on her spiritual life. In the end, she “falls” and, in direct violation of Church teaching, she fulfills her father-in-law’s wishes and ends his life. Leaving aside the morality of her action, once she undertakes this action, the novel only leaves her with two possible outlets: she can commit suicide, or she can renounce her life and enter the convent. In this sense, the novel encapsulates the worst sort of religious thinking, dichotomous and closed off. Rather than allowing Sophie to feel isolated and doubt her faith after the trauma of her father-in-law's death, and then staying with her and seeing what choices she makes and what her life of faith could look like, the religious imagination that is at work in the novel leaves her with nowhere to go. Rather than depicting the struggles of living with the “sword” offered by Christ, Beha turns this sword against his character, thereby circumventing the struggle that living with faith would entail.

While Beha’s novel does allow for the possibility of religious belief – Sophie does, after all, experience *something* that leads her to change her life – as readers we never get a sense of what this something is, nor do we find a compelling reason to look for it. Within the logic of the novel, Charlie Blakeman does seek it out, because he loves Sophie and wants to know what has happened to her, but the only narrative of faith he can offer is a vision in which Sophie ends up in the convent, in which the irrationality of her faith can be contained and explained away as something radically other that is disconnected from life as most of us live it. Thus, while it is encouraging to see a young writer like Beha take Catholicism seriously, those of us interested in the future of

Catholic fiction need to keep waiting for someone who will turn his or her imagination toward the question of what it looks and feels like to be a practicing Catholic in the twenty-first century, who will write about both the experience of lived Catholic religion and the interior disposition that goes along with these religious practices. In the meantime, we can turn to the Catholic novels I surveyed in the preceding chapters, and those like them, which may not always (or often) focus on Catholicism per se, but do engage with the world through the lens of the Catholic imagination, meaning they seek out God's presence not only in moments of shocking grace, but also in the everyday happenings of the world.

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