Groping for Intimacy: Modern Man's "Pressure" and the Onanistic Inversion of Christianity,

Marriage, and the Nuclear Family in Three American Novels

A Thesis Submitted to

The Faculty of the School of Communication

In Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts in English

By

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1 December 2010

Liberty University

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Master of Arts in English

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Acknowledgements

I have felt a keen sense throughout this arduous process that a thesis concerned with the communal nature of the self ought to have quite the "acknowledgements" page. I am indebted to a host of people who have helped shape who I am as an individual at this point in my life, but I am especially grateful to a select few people for their tremendous support and guidance throughout the completion of this project.

Thank you, Grace Assembly, for showing me what Bonhoeffer's conception of "Life Together" looks like in action. I want to thank my new family members – Monte and Brenda Confer, the Stewarts, and the Beisels – for their support and prayers. I also wish to thank all of my fellow graduate students, but a few in particular: Ryan Knight, for your support when I was a first-semester graduate student trying to adjust; Jill Johnson, for your exceeding knowledge of all things related to literature, film, office signs, and positivity; Lauren Roth and Amber Forcey, for that wonderful laugh, long-lost family friends, and jovial times at RP; and Nathan Valle and Andrew Walker, for all of the great times at Oak Hill, including innumerable discussions of all things related to importance – and always over delicious food. Thank you, Ryan Crafts, for taking an interest in this project, reading the novels, and listening to my ideas. I am also thankful for my two best friends – Phil Ososkie and Jimmy Banks – for demonstrating "faithful presence" in my life long before James Davison Hunter used the phrase. I am indebted to my two committee readers: thank you, Dr. Craig Hinkson, for patiently and graciously taking on an English major for a directed research seminar in Kierkegaard, and thank you, Dr. Matt Towles, for countless conversations related both to this project and to the life of a scholar with a young family – and for an encouraging conference weekend at BYU that I will not soon forget. Further, I am particularly grateful to Samuel Loncar for several fruitful conversations over the last few years, which, undoubtedly, have been invaluable in shaping this project.

I cannot express enough heart-felt thanks to Dr. Karen Prior for countless reasons: for believing in me since I first stepped foot in the Swift seminar; for being a gracious, Christ-like mentor who understands, in an unparalleled way, how to meet students where they are; for demonstrating the pursuit of Christological balance in all things, but especially in knowing when to correct and when to encourage; for your direction as Chair of this project, and the encouragement to see my vision through to the end; and for a friendship that I am sure will last far beyond my time at Liberty University.

Thank you, Mom, Dad, and Nate for being the wonderful family that you are, and for your unending love. Thanks, Nate, for countless laughs and for being a brother whose friendship only grows by the year; thanks, Mom, for always demonstrating Christ-like service that I am always mindful of; and thanks, Dad, for the countless ways you have prepared me to love, serve, and lead my own family.

And finally, thank you, Eliza, for your patience and love in our first year of marriage – when you have been pregnant with our son and I have had books to read and pages to write. Without your support, I surely would not have finished this project. Loving you is the furthest thing from a hindrance to my freedom.

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"Inasmuch as the learner is in untruth but is that by his own act . . . he might seem to be free, for to be on one's own certainly is freedom. And yet he is indeed unfree and bound and excluded, because to be free from the truth is indeed to be excluded, and to be excluded by oneself is indeed to be bound."

Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*

"The demand for absolute freedom raises the dilemma of self-dependence in its acutest form. And the renewed saliency of irrational and destructive cravings makes us question the very idea of autonomy[.]"

Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*

"Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen."

Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

"*The autonomous self*. The self sees itself as a sovereign and individual consciousness, liberated by education from the traditional bonds of religion, by democracy from the strictures of class, by technology from the drudgery of poverty, and by self-knowledge from the tyranny of the unconscious – and therefore free to pursue its own destiny without God."

Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*

"Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* came out in 1957 and . . . I resented its apparent instruction to cut loose; *Rabbit, Run* was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road – the people left behind get hurt."

John Updike, Introduction to *Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy*

"[Y]ou were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another."

Saint Paul of Tarsus, *The Letter of Paul to the Galatians*

Introduction

Freedom, following the path laid for her since Immanuel Kant's notion of autonomy, has come to be designated a meaning that would have been alien to our pre-Enlightenment forebears. Stripped by this designation of her inherent responsibilities, freedom has come to be constituted by self-reliance and, in extreme cases, unmitigated devotion to one's impulses. She is now married to a kind of relativistic self-authenticity which is self-derived from person to person, and, thus, ultimately vacuous and potentially nihilistic. Freedom's value – perhaps precisely because it is now considered a mere value – is tenuously subjective, lacking the contextual foundations necessary for virtue, restraint, and concrete meaning.

However, due to the collapse of virtue, restraint, and meaning, relations between self and other have also collapsed under the weight of this vagrant notion of freedom. Hence, the forthcoming discussion will be primarily concerned with taking up the argument that alienation is the necessary corollary of autonomous notions of freedom in modern society. Further, this alienation is the primary source of the 20th C. modern American's malaise – his uneasiness. While many Americans, for various reasons, avoided the brute fact of alienation, some mid-twentieth century novelists perceived and depicted the disintegration of intimacy all too clearly.

Three novels in particular – Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* – deal with modern, alienated individuals and the loss of intimacy within their relationships, a loss related to the sociological institutions of church, marriage, and family. These three institutions are of course inextricably connected as sociological themes, but it is appropriate to cast each novel as addressing one theme in particular: O'Connor's novel deals significantly with alienation and God; Percy's novel, alienation and intercourse; Updike's novel, alienation and the nuclear family. In each novel, the protagonist

takes a basic form of communion that requires intimate commitment to something outside of the self – God, a spouse, a family – and inverts each of these forms of communion so as to be committed solely to the self. Hazel Motes does not just reject God, but he starts his own evangelistic self-religion; Jack "Binx" Bolling does not just make sexual advances outside of the marital institution, but he uses women he barely knows as a means to alleviate his alienation; Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom does not just abandon his family, but he attempts, on his own esthetic terms, to recreate a sense of family with a prostitute.

While various critics have commented on the Kierkegaardian alienation that thematically infuses each of the three novels, little work has been done to contextually situate the themes as illustrating fundamental problems with modern conceptions of freedom and human agency in America. Hence, this work is split into two main parts, each composed of three chapters. The first part offers a narrative, by no means intended to be comprehensive, that situates the three novels within a historical-cultural context, and, ultimately, allows the novels themselves to situate human identity within a sense of narrative. In light of Kierkegaard's varied but undeniable influence on O'Connor, Percy, and Updike, the first chapter situates the Danish philosopher in relation to autonomous notions of agency which have degenerated since Immanuel Kant's. In the second chapter, the automobile will be considered as a distinctly American cultural artifact which concretizes the sense of self-direction that autonomous freedom affords the individual. And, before turning to Part Two, chapter 3 will conclude with a socio-linguistic discussion of how the self is situated within a communal sense of narrative, and how this implicitly and explicitly relates to novelistic structure. Involved most prominently in this discussion will be Charles Taylor, James Davison Hunter, Walker Percy, and Mikhail Bakhtin.

Finally, if freedom conceived as radical self-sufficiency is tantamount to the corrosion of

communal relationships which are necessary for one's identity, then it follows that something is

fundamentally amiss with the modern, autonomous agent's interactions with his fellows. If, as

stated above, the fundamental relational commitments that partly constitute one's identity and

that necessarily involve a mutual giving and receiving of one with the other have been inverted,

then an apt metaphor for this egocentric inversion is onanism. That is, perhaps the autonomous

agent's manipulation of the other – whether God or fellow human beings – for the sole purposes

of his own personal fulfillment has rendered both self and other wasteful, devoid of worth due to

the loss of a more fruitful intercourse.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Kantian Autonomy and Kierkegaardian Despair: The Rise of Radical Notions of Freedom and

the Christian Existentialist Critique of their Validity

Introduction

It is well known that Walker Percy and John Updike were notably influenced by Søren

Kierkegaard. What is less widely considered is that Flannery O'Connor was also influenced by

SK, albeit to a lesser extent. O'Connor was less directly influenced by SK than she was more

considerably influenced by the popularity of existential thought in general during the mid-

twentieth century.[1] Part of the influence and allure of existential thought during the American

post-war period was the feeling that despite expanding individual freedoms, many Americans

still felt a keen sense of dissatisfaction with their existence. Hence, a consideration of SK's

relation to these three authors is best considered against the backdrop of the late eighteenth and

nineteenth-century philosophy that both provided the intellectual milieu for the Danish

philosopher's thought and provides compelling insight for our distinctly American situation.

Samuel Loncar has effectively shown how the dialectic of freedom and alienation in SK's

existential thought is founded upon a history that can be traced back to Kant and German

Idealism.[2] I take the concomitant rise of freedom and alienation from Kant to SK to be a story of

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[1] See "Early Work and *Wise Blood*" in Frederick Asals' *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* for a treatment of the philosophical climate that O'Connor inhabited: "Existentialism was both in the air and in print. From late in the World War II on into the 1950s the influential literary journals . . . to which Flannery O'Connor herself would be contributing by the late 1940s and early 1950s – poured forth a stream of translations, interpretations, and reviews which delivered to their audiences word of this newest mode of thought." Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1982), 29.

[2] Samuel Loncar, 2008. "From German Idealism to Existentialism." Unpublished Paper. Samuel Loncar has provided me with some helpful directions in this analysis; this project has especially

particular relevance for modern America and the three novels with which we are here concerned.

Hence, before recounting this story, it will be helpful for our purposes to establish that

O'Connor, Percy, and Updike perceived despair or malaise as symptoms of a fundamental

misunderstanding of the nature of freedom.

The Relevance of Freedom, Alienation, and Selfhood for O'Connor, Percy, and Updike

O'Connor, Percy, and Updike – though Updike, along with SK, comes from a Protestant

perspective as opposed to the former two's Thomist perspective – seemed to recognize a

profound aberration within dominant conceptions of freedom in American culture.[3] Unwittingly,

O'Connor aligns herself with SK when, in her introduction to the second edition of *Wise Blood*

in 1962, she conceives of freedom as a paradoxical mystery: "Does one's integrity ever lie in

what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but

many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply. It is a mystery and one

which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen."[4] Walker Percy's recognition of

the problems that derive from autonomous notions of freedom – and the direct influence of SK

on this recognition – is noteworthy in his satirical self-help book *Lost in the Cosmos*. There he

rather humorously wonders why "the autonomous self feels so alone in the cosmos" that the

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benefitted from his pointing out the dialectic of freedom and alienation in SK's thought, from his work on SK's critique of autonomous human agency in *The Sickness unto Death*, and from his pointing me in the direction of more recent work on human agency – particularly Charles Taylor's. Both Samuel and Dr. Craig Hinkson have deepened my reading of SK, and provided a nuanced entryway into SK and his prophetic influence on the modern world we inhabit. In tracing the story of the German Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment below, both Samuel's and Dr. Hinkson's works are cited.

[3] That is, general conceptions of these authors as involved in a battle of good versus evil or even Christianity versus secularity, while partially true, are over-reductive of the nuance that compelled their thought and literature.

[4] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 115.

government and primatologists are directing a mass effort to teach chimpanzees and other apes to learn human language.[5] Later, Percy states the fact in "Kierkegaardian terms," saying that the self is "informed," and that despite deluded objections to the contrary, "[t]he fact is that, by virtue of its peculiar relationship to the world, to others, and to its own organism, the autonomous self in a modern technological society is possessed. It is possessed by the spirit of the erotic and the secret love of violence."[6] Lastly, even the prodigious man of letters, John Updike – himself, at times, seemingly a borderline voluptuary – recognized a self-stultifying form of freedom at work in the American *Zeitgeist*. Outside of Updike's novels, this perhaps manifested itself most clearly in a bit of a literary battle in 1984 between Updike and Harold Bloom over the merits of "Emersonianism." Robert Bellah points out that in a piece by that name for *The New Yorker*, John Updike, despite his best efforts at finding a reason to appreciate the American literary/philosophical icon, found Ralph Waldo Emerson's love-affair with self-sufficiency as "too coldly self-absorbed to be very helpful to us today."[7] To which Bloom, in praise for Emerson, took a somewhat veiled, but nonetheless clear, shot at Updike in an essay titled "Mr. America," proclaiming that "the only God in which Americans can any longer believe, [is] the god of the self."[8] These essays and anecdotes allude to an expanding notion of freedom that always threatens the modern with an existence qualified by nothingness because it moves in the direction of rendering void any binding content for a stable identity. Indeed, if Emerson's *Self-Reliance* – a work undoubtedly influenced by the Kantian and Romantic traditions – might be considered in many ways a defining text for American identity, then it

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[5] Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 168.
[6] Ibid., 178.
[7] Robert Bellah, "Individualism and Commitment in American Life," www.robertbellah.com/lectures.html (20 February 1986).
[8] Ibid.

behooves us to return to the German intellectual scene beginning with Kant and leading up to the

prophetic SK – so as to gain a fuller picture of what inspired O'Connor, Percy, and Updike over

against what has inspired a problematic, American notion of radically autonomous freedom.

Kantian Freedom and its Varied Responses during the German Enlightenment

Any discussion of freedom conceived as radically independent self-sufficiency and self-

direction – at least in terms of its being a modern, philosophical, and publically-codified norm,

must begin with Immanuel Kant's notion of freedom – particularly autonomous agency.[9] That

the discussion must begin with Kant is not without due recognition to Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As

many contemporary philosophers, including Charles Taylor, have pointed out, the concept of

self-determining freedom originates with Rousseau.[10] However, as it relates to freedom,

selfhood, morality, and God, autonomy was most foundationally articulated by Kant. Terry

Pinkard notes that Kant's notion of enlightenment entails the human agent's ability to reason

without the counsel of an exterior source.[11] Kant's definition of enlightenment indicates a special

relation that Kant accorded between reason and morality. Yet, not only that, but in answer to the

question of what was needed to accomplish enlightenment, Kant says "all that is needed is

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[9] Though, it must be stated initially that Kant himself, were he still living, would undoubtedly reject this radical notion of freedom that has been largely derived from his thought. John E. Hare has most prominently come to Kant's defense. He has argued that "Kant continued to believe and urged us to believe that a personal God exists, and that we should recognize our duties as God's commands. Kant has been demonized as the presiding genius of modernism[.] . . . But it falsifies his views to make him into this kind of symbol." John E. Hare, *God's Call: Moral Realism, God's Commands, and Human Autonomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 87-8.

[10] "Rousseau is at the origin point of a great deal of contemporary culture, of the philosophies of self-exploration, as well as of the creeds which make self-determining freedom the key to virtue. He is the starting point of a transformation in modern culture towards a deeper inwardness and a radical autonomy." Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1989), 362-3. Additionally, Cartesian self-consciousness is another important "origin point" for autonomous notions of freedom.

[11] Terry Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 19.

freedom."[12] For Kant, freedom must, necessarily, have a moral dimension because he believes

humans are moral agents. However, he also asserts that morality is not normative based on an

exterior source, but is instead "dictated by the very nature of reason itself."[13] Hence, according to

Kant's model, to act freely *is* to act morally because to do so is to act in accordance with true

human nature – and it would be *irrational* to do otherwise. Taylor notes that the impact of Kant's

model cannot be overstated: "This is a more radical definition of freedom, which rebels against

nature as what is merely given, and demands that we find freedom in a life whose normative

shape is somehow generated by rational activity. This idea has been a powerful, it is not

overstated to say revolutionary, force in modern civilization."[14] Indeed, this rational/moral

approach to human agency proves essential to Kant's notion of autonomy.

      Because Kant conceived of humans, in accordance with their true nature, as

rational/moral agents, this had far-reaching implications for his view of freedom. For an agent to

act freely, he must not only rationally consider the moral laws that will govern his actions, but

must actually conceive of the laws that govern his actions as self-imposed. While this idea of

moral self-government could be, and has been, taken to relativistic extremes, Kant had no such

intention. As Pinkard notes, Kant recognized that one could make pleasure his maxim and

motivation for action; however, in contrast to moral duty, this conception of freedom is

conditional on an exterior motivation: "Moral duty, however, as unconditionally binding on us,

requires us to rise above even such things as the pursuit of pleasure[.] . . . It requires, that is, not

just freedom but autonomy, self-determination, giving the practical law to oneself instead of

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[12] Ibid., 20.
[13] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 363.
[14] Ibid., 364.

having any element of it imposed on oneself from outside oneself[.]"[15] Thus, autonomous agency

builds on the notion that an agent's freedom is exhibited by his ability to be a moral law unto

himself – to have the free will not only to devise maxims of conduct, but to "*institute* the

supreme practical law by which those maxims are to be evaluated."[16] Further, the distinction in

Kant's conception of freedom between free choice and free will has significant implications for a

democratic society. A civil authority cannot determine whether an individual is acting out of the

Kantian notion of free will, because we do not have pure access to one another's motivations –

whether they are based on moral duty or on the pursuit of personal advantage.[17] Thus, a free

society would have to be based on the harmonization of free choices. Yet, in the hindsight of

inhabiting such a society, it seems most evident that the problem of personal motivation (the

sources of Kantian "free will") has proven to be a keen problem with which Kant and all post-

Kantians have had to come to grips.

If autonomous agency involves rational/moral self-government that is not coerced by

exterior imposition, then Kant had to supply an anthropological basis for obligation and

motivation. According to Kant, one of the, if not the, major motivations was the dignity inherent

in being a rational agent. Taylor asserts Kant's view concisely: "Everything else in nature . . .

conforms to laws blindly. Only rational creatures conform to laws that they themselves

formulate. This is something incomparably higher. That is why rationality imposes obligations

on us. Because we have the status which is incomparably higher than anything else in nature, we

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[15] Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 52.
[16] Ibid., 55.
[17] This, obviously, has major implications for our own society, and for the problems attendant to the conception of American freedom that O'Connor, Percy, and Updike recognized. This, we will return to below.

have the obligation to live up to it."[18] According to Kant, the agent's rational nature is an end in itself. Yet, this account of motivation seems to ignore the overwhelming prevalence of immorality in "educated" societies. Michelle Kosch rightly notes that, for Kantians, "morality *is* freedom" and, thus, "the idea of freely chosen immorality is unintelligible."[19] Nevertheless, with freedom, morality, and motivation wholly internalized based on the dignity of rational agency, the status of established religion as necessary for one's life became a significant battleground that Kant had to engage in.

It is at this point appropriate to acknowledge that what Kant essentially asserted was that morality was not dependent upon established, revealed religion. While Kant remained a Christian along deistic lines, his conception of Christianity is, according to Taylor, "radically anthropocentric," and the source of the transformation of the agent's will is not God, but "the demands of rational agency itself which lie within."[20] Put simply, if morality gives rise to religion and not religion to morality, then what place does established religion have in people's lives? Kant's final answer, according to Pinkard, seems to be that morality demands a final end: "[R]eligion in its true, rational sense boiled down to . . . 'the recognition of all duties as divine commands,' and the authority of moral duty itself rests on its having been instituted by the agents in the 'kingdom of ends,' not from its being commanded by a God standing outside of human reason."[21] It should be noted that it was deeply important to Kant that his conception of autonomy be considered compatible with Christianity. He went so far as to say that Christianity was "the only example of such a 'moral religion,'" and reinterpreted the story of Jesus' death and

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[18] Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 365.

[19] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* New York: Oxford U P, 2006), 2.

[20] Ibid., 366.

[21] Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 62.

transfiguration as meaning that "'there exists absolutely no salvation for man apart from the most

inward incorporation of genuinely ethical principles into his disposition[.]'"[22] Pinkard points out

that for Kant, "Morality, autonomously doing duty for duty's sake, simply is all there is,

rationally, to the idea of religious salvation."[23] Kant's conception of autonomy would, by itself,

be sufficient to consider over against SK's construal of human agency; however, Kant's

influence created both allies and adversaries among the Romantics and German Idealists – many

of whom would prove to be compelling influences on SK.

  One of the profoundest influences on SK's life and work was the German thinker Johann

Georg Hamann. The pietistic leader of the *Sturm und Drang*[24] movement is necessary to consider

here for two primary reasons: the philosophical/religious battle he undertook against Kant over

the supremacy of rationality, and the significant role he played in reviving and defending the

spirit of Luther "when the *Aufklärung* threatened to destroy it."[25] Of course the two influences

are no doubt related: Luther was seminal in asserting "the frailty of reason" and that "faith

transcends the criticism and demonstration of reason."[26] Beiser argues that Hamann is the natural

competitor to Kant's conception of disembodied, autonomous reason because he claims that

reason is not able to "determine its principles independent of other faculties," but must be

conceived within "a context of social and cultural forces."[27] To question the status of reason as

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[22] Ibid., 65.

[23] Ibid., 65.

[24] Translated "Storm and Stress," the *Sturm und Drang*, over against the *Aufklärung* (see below), was a movement that emphasized the individual's subjectivity and emotional self-expression as a necessary reaction to the constraints of enlightenment rationalism.

[25] *Aufklärung* was the term that came to signify the enlightenment movement of the 18th C. The term was generally accepted as early as Kant's essay "Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?" Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), 17.

[26] Ibid., 17.

[27] Ibid., 17-8.

an end in itself is to throw into question Kant's notion of autonomy. Underlying Hamann's assertion that the faculty of reason must be contextualized is his critique of the post-Cartesian assumption that self-consciousness is the primary province of self-illumination. Instead, Hamann considers self-awareness "problematic, mysterious, and obscure" and asserts that self-knowledge is acquired by knowing our position in "nature, history, and society, for our identity depends upon our relations to everything else."[28] At this point, we can begin to see what was at stake in the battle between Kant and Hamann. While both philosophers affirm the necessity of self-knowledge, they fundamentally differ in how man is to acquire this knowledge and, thus, supply life with significance: for Kant it is reason, while for Hamann it is faith. It would be Johann Gottlieb Fichte who would push Kantian autonomy to its extremes and function as somewhat of a bridge between Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.[29]

Fichte carries on the Kantian mantle of autonomy and sets out to assert it with a new level of force. He, like Kant, maintains two concepts of freedom: the freedom of will and the freedom of choice. One of the most important assertions in Fichte's account of freedom is that it must exclude both necessity and chance. In other words, Beiser notes, freedom entails that "there must be some reason for our actions . . . but it cannot be a cause that compels us to act so that we cannot do otherwise."[30] The Fichtean model of freedom is summarized in the term "self-determination" which necessitates that the agent is only fully free when there are "no external causes to make us what we are."[31] Fichte did come to concede that the agent's identity

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[28] Ibid., 21.

[29] It is generally accepted that German Idealism – a movement which asserted that all of reality was the product of mind, and which includes Fichte and Hegel as its seminal proponents – flowed from the philosophy of Kant.

[30] Beiser, *German Idealism: The Struggle Against Subjectivism 1781-1801* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2008), 274.

[31] Ibid., 277.

inescapably involves wholly exterior factors such as environment and heredity; while the agent

may have the ability to create purposes and live unto them, he cannot have any control over his

properties or characteristics which are dependent upon nature.[32] As a result, Fichte resolves to

conceive of freedom as one's rational *striving* to bring nature incrementally under one's control.

Beiser elucidates the anguish Fichte felt over the seeming impossibility of self-determining

freedom:

> Over no issue was Fichte more uncertain and troubled at this time than the
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> question of the reality of freedom itself. . . . Rather than saying man is free, it is
>
> better just to say that he *strives* and *hopes* to be free. Then in plain blunt language
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> Fichte writes: 'The proposition that 'man is free' is not true[.]' . . . He eventually
>
> resolves this tension by developing the thesis that, although we are not free in the
>
> sense of having absolute independence, we still must *strive* to attain this goal. It is
>
> indeed only in the striving after freedom that we prove that we are free after all.
>
> Ideal freedom requires complete independence, not only *from*, but *over* the causes
>
> of nature; it consists in having causality over everything that is not ourselves.
>
> Although we cannot achieve such complete independence, we can still strive to
>
> approach it.[33]

Ultimately, Fichte falls back on the appeal to conscience and moral duty. When a person fails

morally, his conscience appeals to him that he could have chosen otherwise, and, thus, he has the

duty to believe in the reality of his freedom.

Fichte's musings on freedom led him to adopt an "intersubjective" model of society in

which people make claims for personal rights and place limits on their own freedom toward

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[32] Ibid., 277-8.
[33] Ibid., 293.

respecting and recognizing the rights of others. Here, like Kant, Fichte operates on the good-faith assumption that others will operate with the Kantian free will (inner freedom) to respect one another's sphere of free choices (outer freedom).[34] It is this Kantian/Fichtean model of autonomous moral agency giving rise to an intersubjective normative social order that would provide the foundation for the Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* – the ethical system composed with the goal of reconciling subjectivity and the general social good. Yet, Hegel would come to situate the freedom of the people within the rational-idealistic evolution of *Geist* – or world-history. However, before turning to a brief consideration of Hegel and freedom, we must first consider Friedrich Schlegel's and Johann Ludwig Tieck's romantic irony – particularly their rejection of finitude and unbridled affirmation of infinite possibility.

With regard to the human's free agency, Schlegel and Fichte radicalized freedom in terms of infinite possibility by transposing the Fichtean metaphysical principle for subjectivity onto the finite subject. In consideration of this move and its implications, SK himself is the most evident and helpful critic.[35] In his dissertation, *The Concept of Irony*, SK comments that the early Fichte "infinitely liberated thought" by making the "producing *I*" the same as the "produced *I*" – forming a singular, abstract identity.[36] SK criticizes this "infinity of thought," saying that Fichte's infinity is "an infinity in which there is no finitude, an infinity without any content."[37]

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[34] Ibid., 344.

[35] It is appropriate to note here that more recently it is of scholarly debate as to whether Kierkegaard's view of the German Romantics was an accurate one on the whole. His reading and critique of them – as presented in *The Concept of Irony* – is certainly a Hegelian one. And, to the extent that it is Hegelian, some critics would assert that it is not wholly accurate in its depiction of the Romantics. That said, SK's (and Hegel's) particular critique of the Romantics' problems relating to human agency and freedom as infinite possibility is less disputably an accurate representation – and an apt one. I am indebted to Samuel Loncar for this helpful point of nuance.

[36] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony*, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1989), 273.

[37] Ibid., 273.

SK relates these metaphysical conceptions of freedom in the early Fichte to Schlegel and Tieck by noting that the latter two used this metaphysical conception as a basis for the agent's operating in the world. [38] The essential difficulty with this move, though, is that "the empirical and finite *I* was confused with the eternal *I*[.]"[39] As we will note further below, the Romantics conceived of irony as, unlike Hegelian irony, unbridled because it is not situated in the service of world spirit. That is, "[i]t was not an element of the given actuality that must be negated and superseded by a new element, but it was all of historical actuality that it negated in order to make room for a self-created actuality."[40] This romantic notion of irony "now functioned as that for which nothing was established, as that which was finished with everything, and also as that which had the absolute power to do everything."[41] Schlegel's and Tieck's affirmation of infinite possibility and degradation of finitude is manifested in their literary writings. SK notes that while in *Lucinde* Schlegel "didacticizes" and "turns directly against actuality," in Tieck's novellas, he maintains indulgence "in a poetic abandon" and maintains this "in its indifference toward actuality."[42] Yet, whether the militancy of Schlegel or indifference of Tieck, the result is the same: the inherent boundaries of finitude are abandoned in favor of the perceived advantages of infinite, abstract possibility. SK fully aligns himself with Hegel in negation of these fanciful assertions, commenting that "Hegel's hostile behavior toward it is entirely in order."[43] Though in their rejection of the infinite abstractedness of romantic irony SK and Hegel would no doubt agree, they part ways, however, with regard to how the agent's freedom is situated.

It is common for philosophers to draw a line of connection from Kant to Hegel, and one

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[38] Ibid., 275.
[39] Ibid., 275.
[40] Ibid., 275.
[41] Ibid., 275.
[42] Ibid., 301-2.
[43] Ibid., 275.

appropriate way of doing so is to say that Hegel sought to provide the model – or, system – by which the autonomous self would not have a *situationless* freedom disconnected from nature, but which would also avoid negating the idea of the subjective agent's rational will. SK would of course come to reject much of Hegel's system, but he would certainly – as we will see – agree with Hegel that freedom must be situated, for otherwise it leads to nihilistic vacuity. Regarding the significance of Hegel's relation to Kant, Taylor notes, "Hegel laid bare the emptiness of the free self and the pure rational will, in his critique of Kant's morality and the politics of absolute freedom. And he hoped to overcome this emptiness, to give man a situation, without abandoning the notion of rational will. This was to be done by showing man to be the vehicle of a cosmic reason, which generated its articulations of itself."[44] In sum, Hegel's move was to situate self-determination – leading one's own life – within the historical outworking of what he called "cosmic spirit." Pinkard notes that this historical outworking forms the basis of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "Hegel intended the book to satisfy the needs of contemporary (European) humanity: it was to provide an education, a *Bildung*, a formation for its readership so that they could come to grasp *who* they had become (namely, a people individually and collectively 'called' to be free), *why* they had become those people, and why that has been *necessary*[.]"[45] That is, Hegel asserted that the total outworking of all of history to this point was toward the evolution of self-determining freedom. This was modern man's call. It is no coincidence that Hegel's assertion seems religious, for Hegel conceived of God as evidently unfolding himself in nature. For Hegel, there is a sense in which history – of which man is a part – is God's evolving. At the very least, God is wholly within reach of man's rational reflection. Thus, at bottom, Hegel articulated a religion of immanence.

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[44] Charles Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1998), 158.
[45] Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 222.

The ultimate immanent nature of Hegel's philosophy has proven to be as equally unstable for human agency as the underlying motivation supporting Kant's notion of autonomous agency. Taylor notes that all it took was for Hegel's notion of total self-creation – which was attributable to cosmic spirit – to be "transposed on to man to push the conception of freedom as self-dependence to its ultimate dilemma. He thus played an important part in the intensification of the conflict around the modern notion of freedom."[46] If Hegel can be credited for throwing into question the whole project of self-determining freedom set apart from a background situation – or, an external horizon of significance – SK can be credited for doing the same. However, as we will see, SK's project will avoid abandoning the necessity of both God's transcendence and the *individual* human agent being situated before this transcendent Creator. Thus, as Craig Hinkson notes, while SK "rejects the romantics' excessive emphasis upon the infinity of the human spirit as experienced in imagination and irony, he also rejects Hegel's unimaginative, unironic boundness to finitude. The task of the individual is to reconcile *both* aspects of his nature."[47] Influenced by the Romantics and German Idealists, SK emphasizes subjectivity, but also recognizes the necessity for the subject to actualize content for a coherent existence.

Kierkegaard's Critique of Autonomous Freedom in *The Sickness unto Death*

While Kierkegaard's emphasis on subjectivity must no doubt be understood against the background of late eighteenth and nineteenth-century thought regarding human agency, he is not an ally to autonomous notions of freedom, but instead provides a point of departure from them. In one telling journal entry in 1850, SK notes,

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[46] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 167.
[47] Craig Hinkson, "The Romantic-Idealist Roots of Kierkegaard's Existential Dialectic," *Kierkegaard's Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in his Thought* (PhD diss., University of Chicago 1993), 271-2.

Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy) – that is, he binds himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established. . . . If I am bound by nothing higher than myself and I am to bind myself, where would I get the rigorousness as A, the binder, which I do not have as B, who is supposed to be bound, when A and B are the same self.[48]

In his own witty way, SK echoes the problem of sufficient motivation for Kantian autonomy. Pinkard comments that "for [SK], the modern world has promised freedom but, instead had delivered a deadening conformity, and, even worse, a kind of puffed up rhetoric about itself that seemed far removed from its tawdry reality."[49] This "tawdry reality" – which SK believed all of the modern, rhetorical systems[50] regarding freedom and the ethical life had failed to sufficiently address or improve – is, in a sense, the foundation for his existential thought.

As alluded to above, Hamann proves to be a significant influence on SK's conception of human agency, for he is most responsible for arousing SK's interest in both Socrates and Luther. Hinkson notes that SK was indebted to Socrates, as mediated by Hamann, for his existential thought, and that Hamann's Socrates was distinctly Christian; Hamann sought to release Socrates from the clutches of the *Aufklärer* by accusing them of ignoring Socrates' claim to be the recipient of divine revelations, and his recognition that genuine self-understanding lay beyond

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[48] *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 1*, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U P, 1967), Entry 188, pp. 76.
[49] Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 346.
[50] Pinkard notes that "[o]n Kierkegaard's view, the fate of the modern world was not the establishment of reconciliation in *Sittlichkeit* and free politics, but a social world of puffed-up conformism populated by despairing individuals engaged in efforts to deny and repress their despair. What modernity had done, in Kierkegaard's view, was to make it clear that what people made of their lives was entirely up to them, although, in a strangely paradoxical way, not up to them at all. Modernity itself, so it seemed to Kierkegaard, had simply failed." Ibid., 355.

man's ken.[51] That is, they both, in common with Luther, maintained a profound mistrust of

human nature and its ability to rationally comprehend itself. But Luther, too, needed to be freed

from the *Aufklärer's* clutches. The typical misappropriation of Luther that characterized

Hamann's and SK's contemporaries' thought was that he was the champion – the liberator – of

autonomous reason.[52] Ironically, of course, Luther's ideas are completely at odds with the

Enlightenment's humanistic optimism. Rather, as Hinkson rightly notes, "Against a common foe

– reason and its pretensions – Luther, Hamann, and Kierkegaard appealed to the deep fallenness

of human nature and its utter inability to establish a point of contact with God, on the one hand,

and to the transcendence of God and the incomprehensibility of his wondrous, saving acts, on the

other."[53] Indeed, for SK, human nature is so deeply corrupted by sin that there is an absolute

divide between God and man; further, if there is to be any reconciliation between God and man,

this divide necessitates a revelation that is both authoritative and paradoxical.

    If SK is right that man is inhibited by his sin to such an extent that he cannot encounter

God via his natural capabilities, then God's self-revelation will necessarily appear *offensive* to

reason. Here, I would argue that Hinkson's elucidation of SK's and Luther's "theology of the

cross" is exceedingly significant for understanding Kierkegaard, autonomous freedom, and

human agency:

> [B]ecause God's absolute unlikeness cannot even in principle become manifest
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> except by a paradoxical assumption of likeness (likeness with an unsettling
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> dissonance about it), Kierkegaard is led to posit Luther's Christological sense of

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[51] Craig Hinkson, "Kierkegaard, Socrates, and the Maieutic Art." *Papers of the Nineteenth Century Theology Group* XXXII (2001): 10, 13-4.

[52] Craig Hinkson, "Will the Real Martin Luther Please Stand Up! Kierkegaard's View of Luther versus the Evolving Perceptions of the Tradition," *International Kierkegaard Commentary: 'For Self-Examination' and 'Judge for Yourself!'* (Macon, GA: Mercer U P, 2002), 62-3.

[53] Ibid., 74.

hiddeneness, as well. The lowly servant of all, Jesus of Nazareth, is the omnipotent, Lord God of all. Kierkegaard's "*God incognito*" and Luther's "*God hidden in sufferings*" are equivalent expressions of the necessity of indirect communication where revelation is concerned: if God is to manifest himself at all to sinful humans, such manifestation will necessarily entail an act of condescension that simultaneously conceals him, preserving intact the essential secrecy of Godhead. The paradoxical character of revelation is necessarily *scandalous* to reason.[54]

I would argue that God's manifestation in Christ as a paradoxical "incognito" is relevant toward our consideration of what constitutes free human agency. On my reading of SK and the relevant scholarship, there are two primary respects in which the human agent must come to understand his freedom as paradoxically expressed in submission or service: (1) the created human agent must come to understand freedom in terms of accepting the necessary aspects of his situation that are beyond his control as designated by a Creator[55] and, therefore, (2) freedom's possibility is materially qualified by the object of his choosing – i.e., in the profoundest (and most narrowed) sense, the acceptance or rejection of those revealed designations.[56] Here, it is important to

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[54] Craig Hinkson, "Luther and Kierkegaard: Theologians of the Cross," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 39.

[55] Michelle Kosch provides a helpful starting point for Kierkegaard and agency: "Created things can be responsible to some extent for how they are, but they cannot be responsible for the fact *that* they are without ceasing to be created things. The same thing goes for created agents: they can be responsible for how they use their agency, but they cannot be responsible for the fact that they are agents to begin with without ceasing to be created agents." Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 96.

[56] Or, as Hinkson puts it, "[F]reedom and unfreedom are purchased, alike, by the relinquishment of freedom to one of two powers – to God or to sin." Craig Hinkson, "Kierkegaard's Teaching on the Will: *Liberum Arbitrium* or *Servum Arbitrium*?" *Kierkegaard's Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in his Thought* (PhD diss., University of Chicago 1993), 154.

ascertain that although SK's conception of the self is qualified by necessity, it is not, as Samuel

Loncar notes, "a complete repudiation of self-determining freedom. For while our nature is, in

one sense, given, we have the freedom and responsibility to become a certain type of self that we

are not simply in virtue of existing."[57] Though published after *Either/Or*, *The Sickness unto*

Death provides the most insight into SK's conception of human agency and, thus, will provide

an excellent initial backdrop against which to consider the esthetic and ethical depictions of

human agency found in *E/O*.

　　　In *SUD*, SK offers his clearest elucidation of the human agent: he is constituted by a

synthetic relation, which is itself an established relation beyond the agent's control. SK, via Anti-

Climacus, asserts that man is "a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the

eternal, of freedom, and necessity, in short a synthesis. A synthesis is a relation between two."[58]

This synthesis becomes a self when the relation "relates itself to itself" – i.e., becomes self-

conscious; however, this self "must either have established itself or have been established by

another."[59] SK contends that the human self *is* this *derived* relation. Loncar comments that SK's

theory of the self is similar to Fichte's except in this particularly important point of its derived

constitution: "This is Kierkegaard's major modification of Fichte's theory, the first principle of

which is the self's positing of itself. Fichte's idealism has to explain how all experience of

necessity . . . and otherness are compatible with the idea that everything that is posited within the

self. By contrast, for Kierkegaard the self does *not* posit itself but is rather posited by another."[60]

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[57] Samuel Loncar, "From Jena to Copenhagen: Kierkegaard's relations to German idealism and the critique of autonomy in *The Sickness unto Death*," *Religious Studies* (2010): 12.

[58] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1980), 13.

[59] Ibid., 13-4.

[60] Loncar, "From Jena to Copenhagen: Kierkegaard's relations to German idealism and the critique of autonomy in *The Sickness unto Death*," 9.

Based on the self's being a derived relation, the rest of *SUD* expounds upon two primary ways in which the human agent can be in despair: not to will to be oneself and to will to be oneself in the wrong way. In other words, despair is not the result of one's lack of free agency, but results from the misunderstanding of the nature of his free agency. The two primary expressions of despair – not to will to be oneself or to will to be oneself in the wrong way – can manifest themselves in multiple ways. As Kosch puts it, "Despair in the most general sense will turn out to be the unwillingness to accept human agency with all of its particular conditions. There are many ways to do this, and each will be accompanied by a corresponding distortion – a failure of fit."[61] Loncar expands on Kosch's elucidation of despair as unwilling submission by showing how SK anticipates Charles Taylor's notion of man as being partially constituted by self-interpretation; that is, despair is not merely the result of faulty self-conceptions or poor choices, but is a state of existence."[62] The synthetic relations of human agency – infinite and finite, temporal and eternal, freedom and necessity – must be in balanced tension and the agent can only achieve this balance by grounding his existence in – or, perhaps more correctly, relating his self to – the One who established the relation (i.e. God). Thus, to not will to be oneself is to be materially qualified by nothing; it is, in despair, to relate oneself to nothing and, thus, to hollow out in nothingness. Conversely, to despairingly will to be oneself is to choose to ground oneself in something other than God. Kosch makes two helpful points regarding SK's conception of human agency: first, it is constituted by the interrelation between freedom and constraint and, secondly, that it is, except the point of the agent relating himself to the power that posited him, similar to popular

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[61] Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 154.
[62] Loncar, "From Jena to Copenhagen: Kierkegaard's relations to German idealism and the critique of autonomy in *The Sickness unto Death*," 11.

nineteenth-century conceptions of human agency like Fichte's.[63] The typical models of freedom

as self-starting, or, self-positing, are examples of an agent despairingly willing to be himself.

And this form of despair – more precisely, the despair of the self which "becomes lost in

possibility"[64] – is the form of despair we are primarily interested in here in our consideration of

modern notions of freedom. Interestingly, SK, via Anti-Climacus, describes despair as an

"impotent self-consuming that cannot do what it wants to do."[65] This willing self-consumption

is, ironically, one's self-annihilation, for he wants to "tear his self away from the power that

established it."[66] If one's freedom is not qualified by "the power to obey, to submit to the

necessity in one's life, to what may be called one's limitations"[67] then one is not truly free. This

despairing agent who is lost in possibility – who wishes to be "master of itself"; who wishes "to

make his self into the self he wants to be"; who wishes to "begin a little earlier than do other

men, not at and with the beginning, but 'in the beginning'"[68] – is the type of agent we want to

bear in mind as we consider the esthetic and ethical lifestyles presented pseudonymously in *E/O*.

The Dialectic of Freedom and Alienation in *Either/Or*

SK's *E/O* is significant to consider with regard to human agency because it presents two

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[63] "On the view presented in *The Sickness unto Death*, the self does not posit itself absolutely, but owes its existence as a self to something beyond and above it. . . . Here is where the disagreement with Fichte makes itself apparent. The self is spontaneous (its actions do not have their causal source in events preceding them in time). But it is not the source of the laws that govern it; nor is it the source of its own existence as a self (that is, its existence as the sort of thing that has spontaneity and moral responsibility). (Note that this means not only that it does not bring itself into existence but also that it cannot alter its fundamental structure – say, by keeping the self-consciousness but ridding itself of the spontaneity.)." Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard*, 200.

[64] Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, 36.

[65] Ibid., 18.

[66] Ibid., 20.

[67] Ibid., 36.

[68] Ibid., 67-8.

approaches to existence – the esthetic and the ethical – that provide essential examples of how an agent conceives of his freedom and identity; further, I take the exposition of *both* approaches to agency and their attendant problems – despite Judge William's closer proximity to authentic freedom – as characterizing the shortcomings of both Kantian autonomy and its subsequent aberrant forms in the post/modern age. *E/O* is constituted by two parts that have been edited by "Victor Eremita"; in part I, SK presents the esthetic view of life via "A," who is, himself, an esthete, and, in part II, SK presents the ethical view of life via "Judge William." Broadly speaking, the esthetic approach to agency is characterized by the agent's living in what SK calls immediacy, or, in the moment; in contrast, the ethical approach to agency is constituted by the agent's binding himself to significant ethical commitments. I would argue that both views, while vastly different, are qualitatively grounded in a sense of autonomy, or, by differing approaches to self-determination. In the end, my argument regarding the onanistic nature of autonomy that I find apparent in both modes of existence, will flow from my agreement with Pinkard: SK intends for the reader to come to realize that there is no choice between the agent's leading his own life esthetically or leading his own life ethically because of the impossibility of an agent's wholly leading his own life at all.[69] Against this backdrop of interpretation, we will first consider the autonomous-esthetic approach to existence.

Because leading one's own life esthetically is constituted by immediate-desire fulfillment,[70] the human agent who leads such an existence necessarily comes to maintain

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[69] "The intended result of *Either/Or* is to leave the reader in the situation where he is to realize that, in the choice between *either* leading the aesthetic life *or* leading the ethical life, there can be only despair over the impossibility of leading one's own life in *general*." Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 351.

[70] Of course, in *E/O*, there are variations in immediacy within the esthetic sphere, but these variations have to do with the extent of *reflection* that the agent has in his immediacy. That is, a child has little to no reflection in his immediacy, but a seducer (as we will see below) has desires

relationships that are instrumental; and, thus, what I am going to refer to as the "autonomous-esthetic"[71] existence produces a kind of human agency characterized by one's *manipulation* of others for his own *fulfillment* with disregard for the other's desire-fulfillment – ultimately producing *waste* for both self and other. This selfish form of interpersonal agency – characterized by manipulation, fulfillment, and waste – provides the contours for my analogous use of *onanism* throughout this project. This form of esthetic autonomy falls under the broad category of despairingly not willing to be oneself. Victor Eremita gives the reader the initial intimation that A's life lacks coherence because, in contrast to Judge William, "there is no information at all about him."[72] A's scattered writings come to fulfill this intimation. While at times assertive and lively, A also comments that one of his most intimate confidants is his depression: "My depression is the most faithful mistress I have known – no wonder, then, that I return the love."[73] The reason his depression is his most faithful mistress is evident when he makes some notably asocial assertions. A warns that one should "stay clear of friendship,"[74] and "never become involved in marriage."[75] In what may be his most revealing and evidently self-stultifying assertion regarding freedom and commitments, A provides his rationale for avoiding friendship and marriage:

> One must always guard against contracting a life relationship by which one can
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> become many. That is why even friendship is dangerous, marriage even more so.

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that are inextricable from his reflections – and, at a certain extreme, *his own reflections* become the object of utmost fulfillment.

[71] I mean for this to be an obviously cruder form of autonomy – one which, we can determine along with Kant, can certainly – and very easily – spiral out of the agent's control.

[72] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I* ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1987), 7.

[73] Ibid., 20.

[74] Ibid., 295-6.

[75] Ibid., 296.

> They do say that marriage partners become one, but this is very obscure and mysterious talk. If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom and cannot order his riding boots when he wishes, cannot knock about according to whim. If he has a wife, it is difficult; if he has a wife and perhaps children, it is formidable; if he has a wife and children, it is impossible.[76]

A's hostility toward, and lack of, permanent relational commitments seems to cause his depression. Tellingly, he says, "I have, I believe, the courage to doubt everything; I have, I believe, the courage to fight against everything; but I do not have the courage to acknowledge anything, the courage to possess, to own, anything."[77] And, further, A seems to revel in the fact of his meaningless existence: "[T]he only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness."[78] A replaces permanent commitments with immediate satisfactions, and takes Don Juan as his guide to the artistic-life.[79]

A sets up "Don Juan"[80] as a paradigmatic figure for his esthetic existence. He distinguishes between immediate seduction and reflective seduction:

> In the musical Don Juan, there would then be the extensive seducer; in the other, the intensive. So the latter Don Juan is not presented as possessing his object with one single blow – he is not the immediately qualified seducer; he is the reflective seducer. That which occupies us here is the subtlety, the cunning, whereby he knows how to steal into a girl's heart, the dominion he knows how to gain over it,

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[76] Ibid., 297.
[77] Ibid., 23.
[78] Ibid., 37.
[79] The "artistic-life" denotes the idea that the esthete's life remains lost in possibility. Giving oneself over to infinite possibility results in the flight from actuality, or concrete existence, for actuality necessitates the exclusion of possibilities.
[80] A favors the musical Don Juan over the literary Don Juan because words always denote ethical boundaries that inhibit possibility.

the enthralling, deliberate, progressive seduction. How many he has seduced is of

no importance here; what occupies us is the artistry, the meticulousness, the

profound cunning with which he seduces. . . . The musical Don Juan enjoys the

satisfaction; the reflective Don Juan enjoys the deception, enjoys the craftiness.

The immediate pleasure is past, and reflection on the enjoyment is enjoyed

more.[81]

For both the immediate and the more reflective seductive-esthete, a potential commitment in the

form of a relationship with a woman is inverted so that the woman is objectified as a means to

the end of personal pleasure. Whereas a commitment would be considered a constraint to the

esthete's freedom, the manipulation of another person toward the fulfillment of personal desire is

imagined as realized freedom. While the immediate esthete enjoys the act of pleasure itself, the

more self-aware, reflective esthete enjoys his own enjoyment. Further, the craft of the seduction

provides A with the antidote of amusement to what he classifies as life's chief evil: boredom.[82]

In order to achieve control over his own enjoyment, the seducing esthete makes his life – indeed,

his interactions with others – into a work of art that is subordinate to his whim as the artist. In his

inward reflections, Johannes the Seducer[83] attempts to fashion the circumstances of his existence

into a situation that can be enjoyed. This esthetic re-creation lends itself to the end of self-

sufficiency, of independence. The Seducer's extreme goal is perhaps most concisely stated in his

stance contra God and His human agents: "I have always tried to develop the beautiful Greek

αὐτάρκεια (self-sufficiency), and especially to make a pastor superfluous."[84] In the place of

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[81] Ibid., 107-8.
[82] Ibid., 290.
[83] Regardless of whether or not "A" and Johannes the Seducer are, in fact, intended by SK to be the same pseudonymous character, they are both stitches from the same cloth.
[84] Ibid., 415.

religious submission, the Seducer is intoxicated with his own power – by the thought that

Cordelia is beholden to his power.[85] He is essentially an asocial god using others to fulfill

himself: "My relationship to her is like a dance that is supposed to be danced by two people but

is danced by only one. That is, I am the other dancer, but invisible."[86] Here, again, the onanistic

imagery is apparent, and all it takes for this debased form of agency to become normative is the

breaking down of motivation on Kant's rational/moral paradigm.

There is a sense in which the esthetic sphere – in all of its varying, actual manifestations

– is constituted by a transposition of Kant's notion of autonomy from a rational/moral norm for

agency to a desire-fulfillment norm for agency. And, if this is the case, the implications for the

agent's relationships are disastrous for both the people who become manipulable objects that

serve the end of the agent's self-satisfaction, and for the agent himself who, from these

instrumental relations, produces only *waste* – certainly no viable content for a safe, coherent

identity. That this distorted form of free agency is recognizable to us today is beyond dispute. In

fact, Taylor – who has put forth contemporary work on human agency which is, some critics

have argued, in many ways anticipated by SK[87] – comments on this form of agency that is

predicated on a desire-fulfillment norm: "The advantage of the view that freedom is the absence

of external obstacles is its simplicity. It allows us to say that freedom is being able to do what

you want, where what you want is unproblematically understood as what the agent can identify

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[85] Ibid., 377.

[86] Ibid., 380.

[87] Loncar, for instance, asserts that Taylor's work on the self's being constituted by self-interpretation is helpful in further elucidating the nature of Kierkegaardian despair, because if despair could be considered a "false self-interpretation," then "we can speak of despair, as Kierkegaard does, as a state in which we exist, and not merely choices we make or even conceptions we have of ourselves." Loncar, "From Jena to Copenhagen," 12. We will consider Taylor's works on human agency more fully in chapter three below.

as his desires."[88] Taylor decisively rebuts the notion, saying that there "seem to be cases in which

the obstacles to freedom are internal; and if this is so, then freedom cannot simply be interpreted

as the absence of *external* obstacles; and the fact that I am doing what I want, in the sense of

following my strongest desire, is not sufficient to establish that I am free."[89] For further critique

of the esthetic sphere, and the assertion of an identity involving permanent, relational

commitments, we now turn to the ethical life asserted by Judge William in his critique of A in

part II of *E/O*.

SK, via Judge William, provides an ethico-religious[90] critique of A that highlights the

problems attendant to the autonomous-esthete. One of the first reprimands the Judge provides in

his letter to A is that he is "the epitome of any and every possibility[.] . . . You pursue every

mood, every idea, good or bad, happy or sad, to its outermost limit, but in such a way that it

happens more *in abstracto* than *in concreto*, so that this pursuit is itself more a mood, from

which nothing more results than a knowledge of it[.]"[91] As a result of the supposed freedom that

A finds in despairingly not willing to be himself, he has, according to the Judge's rendering,

made himself "impervious to any attribution of responsibility."[92] Further, the Judge identifies

A's depression as representative of society at large and a defect of the age; it is a depression that

has "robbed us of the courage to command, the courage to obey, the power to act, the confidence

to hope[.]"[93] Clearly connecting this depression to ethical/social problems, the Judge says that

A's enjoyment is "egotistical," and comments that A never gives of himself – never lets others

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[88] Charles Taylor, *Philosophy and the Human Sciences* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1985), 215.
[89] Ibid., 222.
[90] "Ethico-religious" seems an apt description of Kantian autonomy.
[91] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part II* ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1987), 17.
[92] Ibid., 17.
[93] Ibid., 24.

enjoy him.[94] Indeed, in one fell swoop, the Judge comments on love as involving a freedom

qualified by constraint: "But just as the nature of all love is a unity of freedom and necessity, so

also here. The individual feels himself free in this necessity, feels his own individual energy in it,

feels precisely in this the possession of everything he is."[95] According to the Judge, A's

conception of freedom as infinite, abstract possibility – uninhibited by concrete, exterior

commitments – is actually enslaving and self-contradictory because by never "finding solidity"

in his life, he never "acquires content,"[96] but instead "withers away in atrophy."[97] The primary

example that Judge William provides for how the agent's ethical/social commitments define his

identity is the marital institution according to which one's identity is defined by his commitment

as a husband to his wife or as a father to his children. While the Judge's critique of A's lack of

ethical commitments is helpful in considering that which is necessary for agency and identity

formation, the Judge's admonitions for A to lead his own life ethically raise questions regarding

the motivational source for the perseverance that is necessary for the moral agent to remain

bound to his commitments.

    Within the Judge's critique of the esthetic life are hints of Kantian autonomy that,

ultimately, foster an onanistic disregard for the relationship between the autonomous-ethicist and

the transcendent Creator. That is, there is a sense in which the Judge, though he in several places

acknowledges God's existence, considers himself his own authority. When considering what

shall bind him to his ethical commitments, the Judge's response is telling: "And if I cannot fulfill

my duty, where is the authority to compel me? State and Church have indeed set a certain limit,

but even though I do not go to the extreme, can I not therefore be a bad husband? Who will

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[94] Ibid., 24-5.
[95] Ibid., 43.
[96] Ibid., 87.
[97] Ibid., 163.

punish me? Who will stand up for her who is the victim? . . . Answer: you yourself."[98] Similarly, the Judge points out that the agent who lives ethically will face difficulties, and "when the darkness of the storm clouds so envelops him that his neighbor cannot see him, he still has not perished, there is always a point to which he holds fast, and that point is – himself."[99] While the Judge may lead a more respectable life than A, his ethico-religious attempts at respectability are self-righteous manipulations of God's divine revelation that have as their aim self-fulfillment.[100] Here, again, we can turn to Taylor both for confirmation of *E/O*'s relevance in our own day and for yet another critique of Kantian autonomy: "The demand for absolute freedom raises the dilemma of self-dependence in its acutest form. And the renewed saliency of irrational and destructive cravings makes us question the very idea of autonomy[.]"[101] Ultimately, for SK, while the ethico-religious agent is in a sense closer to realizing his freedom than the esthetic agent, he has not yet realized the paradox that any attempt to lead one's own life – whether esthetically, ethically, or in immanent religiousness – is a form of slavery because he has not fully submitted to the divine call, as manifested in Christ, to relate himself to his Creator.

     SK asserts that genuine freedom can only be realized in submission to Christ. This

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[98] Ibid., 151.

[99] Ibid., 253.

[100] Pinkard, as mentioned above, takes this reading of Judge William as living autonomously in the Kantian sense – or as inhabiting a roughly similar Hegelian notion of the ethical life. However, Hinkson comments that the Judge, despite his "ethical optimism," does not assert a "positive capability" with regard to freedom. Hinkson, "Kierkegaard's Teaching on the Will: Liberum Arbitrium or Servum Arbitrium?" 153. While these assertions may appear contradictory, Hinkson's view is primarily based on the enclosed sermon in the end of *E/O II* – "The Upbuilding that Lies in the Thought that in Relation to God, We Are Always in the Wrong." It should be noted that the enclosed sermon is, in a sense, separate from the Judge's initial letters to A. Further, the two critical views seem reconciled when Pinkard notes that B "discovers (or at least acquires the intimation) that the paradox of self-legislation cannot be avoided by talk of duty, or ethical community." The "intimation" Pinkard refers to is clearly the enclosed sermon and it seems equally evident that the Judge's tone has transitioned from apparent smugness to humbled graciousness. Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 351.

[101] Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society*, 161.

paradoxical freedom is qualified not by reason, but by faith. Further, this faith is wholly

dependent on God's revelation in Christ. But, again, as Hinkson asserts, due to the absolute

divide between God and man, God's revealing of Himself is necessarily an "incognito" or, a

"hiddenness." God takes on the form of a *servant* in Christ, but also exhibits the utmost freedom.

Pinkard supports this interpretation of SK and free agency: "One must, instead, give oneself over

to God and accept that only by submitting one's life to God's judgment can one then have a life

of one's own. The 'Kantian paradox' is 'overcome' only by acknowledging the Christian

paradox that one must first give up one's life in order to have one's life."[102] SK emphasizes both

of the Christian doctrines of man's freedom *and* that it is conditioned by God's grace. That man

can be in despair is, essentially, a kind of freedom that places him above the animals. However,

it is a negative freedom, for though the human agent is free to reject God, he would be rejecting

the thing most needful for his freedom – Freedom itself. Though SK recognizes that the human

agent must submit his self transparently before God in order to realize his freedom, there is also a

sense in which the human agent comes to this crisis of the will via his choices and the realization

that his choices prove ineffective apart from God's will. Hinkson notes that the progression of

SK's stages "resembled a kind of funnel in which one's possibilities became more and more

limited until, at last, they had been reduced, really, to but one: either Christianity . . . or

despair."[103] Eventually, once the human agent's failed choices have been reduced by God, his

choice between God and alienation from God is qualified so absolutely by the agent's reliance on

God's grace that it is as if there is no choice.[104] Yet, ultimately, while SK advocates the necessity

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[102] Pinkard, *German Philosophy 1760-1860*, 353.

[103] Hinkson, "Kierkegaard's Teaching on the Will: Liberum Arbitrium or Servum Arbitrium?" 160.

[104] S.K. asserts as much in his journal when he says, "[T]he very fact that there is no *choice* expresses the tremendous passion or intensity with which one *chooses*. Can there be a more

of God's revelation, he still remains too committed to the human agent's personal crisis moment of choice with God. While SK provides a departure from autonomous notions of freedom in Christian terms, he also opens a debate as to whether he advocates his own peculiar individualism.

The Lack of Community in Kierkegaard's Thought

Though SK offers a compelling critique of Kantian autonomy on the basis of the human agent's need for revelation, his thought seems ultimately bereft of the realization that the Kantian move which transposes the *telos* of authority from God's revelation to human reason also has profound implications for the human agent's relationship with other people. We noted above that although SK's ethical pseudonym, Judge William, provides a sharp and needed critique of A's lack of commitments, he also, until his acquired intimation in the conclusion of *E/O*, remains committed to God on the basis of his own authority as an ethical agent. Further, in SK's thought, there is still a tendency for the human agent, due to his powers of choice and passionate subjectivity in relation to God, to retain a problematic independence from other human agents. That is, it seems that in Kierkegaard's thought the human agent is conceived of as relational, but his relational activity is excessively a matter between his interior self and God, and his interdependence with the Body of Christ – the Church – is ultimately deemphasized.

It is common knowledge that SK is often accused of asserting a form of individualism. His writings concerning human agency, while eminently extensive and laudable, seem to lack a

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accurate expression for the fact that freedom of choice is only a formal condition of freedom and that emphasizing freedom of choice as such means the sure loss of freedom? The content of freedom is decisive for freedom to such an extent that the very truth of freedom of choice is: there must be no *choice*, even though there is a choice." Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 2*, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U P, 1970), Entry 1261, pp. 68.

theology of the church. Several excuses can, and have been, inserted on behalf of the Danish philosopher. A few arguments, in particular, seem most fashionable: that SK was too concerned with the authenticity of the individual Christian in the face of "Christendom" or the Hegelian system that he saw so many problems with; that he himself avoided significant relationships because of the fear instilled in him by his father that he was going to die at an early age; or, that SK, due in large part to the "Corsair Affair," became a bit of an embittered recluse. Further, some critics – notably C. Stephen Evans – take a more positive view SK's view of community and are quick to note that the attribution of sociality is often *implicated* in his construal of human agency. However, I agree with Hinkson (and the relevant scholarship attendant to his argument) that SK's apparent individualism is perhaps most attributable to a particular line of thought in his theology: a preoccupied, overemphasis of suffering in his Christology and, in a related sense, his overemphasis of subjectivity. In a sense this point seems to unify the typical assertions mentioned above, while also validating the claim that SK is ultimately individualistic. Hinkson argues convincingly that upon consideration of SK's Christology, "[I]n the end, the Christian who would imitate Christ assumes suffering not out of concern for his neighbor's well-being, but out of the priority (and hence, merit) that the suffering enjoys in its own right. And the facts, indeed, bear this supposition out."[105] Hinkson ultimately pinpoints this overemphasis of suffering as the result of SK's de-emphasis of the resurrection: "[T]he problem is that on SK's presentation the believer's contemporaneous imitation of *Christ the model* is unqualified by the *Christ the redeemer's* enabling presence."[106] Perhaps most notably, Hinkson points out that the glorified, *risen* Christ is foundational for a theology of the church, and, thus, SK's over-emphasis

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[105] Hinkson, "Cross without Resurrection," *Kierkegaard's Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in His Thought* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1993), 231-2.

[106] Ibid., 237.

of the contemporaneous imitation of Christ's modeled suffering fosters individualism:

> [T]he absence of any relationship to [the risen Christ] should entail the absence of
> any relationship to his body. Conversely, the Christ with whom Kierkegaard
> seems best acquainted is Christ the model. The only possible relationship with
> him is imitation through suffering. But as Kierkegaard makes clear, concentration
> on 'the collective' is inimical to the category of imitation, which relates to the
> individual. *Isolation* is the element in which discipleship breathes, and suffering is
> the instrument by which people are individualized and driven into isolation. . . .
> The net result of SK's extreme emphasis upon imitation in suffering is a strong
> doctrine of the individual, but not of the church.[107]

Thus, what remains irreconcilable in SK's thought is a situation in which a free agent can be an authentically Christian individual within an interdependent church body. That is, it seems unlikely to imagine SK conceiving of a Christian as becoming more like Christ through the manifestation of his church body as opposed to the individualistic imitation of His sufferings. Finally, and certainly most strikingly in light of this discussion, Hinkson comments that

> for all Kierkegaard's talk about the 'equilibrium' of the erotic and the ethical or
> about a dynamic 'synthesis' between soul and body, eternity and temporality,
> finitude and infinity, there are hints that what is intended is the *revocation*, not the
> sublation, of the countermoment. One may cite, for example, Judge William's
> assertions at the end of *Either/Or II* that 'every person is an exception' and that
> such exceptionality can lead to one's becoming 'an extraordinary human being in
> a nobler sense' since what is lost by way of extensiveness can be won 'in

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[107] Ibid., 244-6.

intensive inwardness.' The hidden agenda as early as *Either/Or II*, *seems* to be

that of *not* realizing the universal, but rather, achieving an 'intensive inwardness'

in isolation from the others.[108]

In addition to his peculiar preoccupation with Christological suffering, SK also overemphasizes

subjectivity – the exceptional nature of the individual person – to the extent that he comes to

denigrate the finitude of the world, or, we might say, creation itself. Here, SK certainly parts

ways with Luther and the implications fully support the view that SK held a disregard for

authentic community life – in and outside of the church.

Conclusion

SK has provided us with both a profound critique of autonomous notions of freedom and

a point of departure where he has still asserted a form of individualism. My analysis in Part 2 of

Wise Blood, *The Moviegoer*, and *Rabbit, Run* will turn on both of these conclusions; that is, I

believe each author offers a Kierkegaardian-worthy critique of autonomous notions of freedom,

but, ultimately (though, to varying degrees) cannot avoid forms of individualism in their

depictions of redemptive possibilities. Ultimately, as I will argue more extensively in chapter

three, what these authors' visions are lacking is the notion that the greatest *signals of*

transcendence (to borrow Peter L. Berger's phrase)[109] are communal acts that serve to emphasize

and manifest the comedic reconciliation of the risen Christ. But, first, let us turn to a

consideration of what is both an enabler and cultural artifact of the autonomous individual in

twentieth-century America: the automobile.

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[108] Hinkson, "The Romantic-Idealist Roots of Kierkegaard's Existential Dialectic," 289.
[109] Berger has used the phrase "signal of transcendence" in various interviews and works; I will
return to it most substantially in chapter 3, referring to his book, *Redeeming Laughter: The
Comic Dimension of Human Experience*.

Part 1, Chapter 2

Autonomous Agents in the American Dream-Machine: From Romanticizing the Road's

Possibility to Transcending the "Constraints" of Relational Commitments, Time, and Place

Introduction

The automobile is undoubtedly a prominent symbol in the three mid twentieth-century

novels addressed here: Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*, and

John Updike's *Rabbit, Run*. Like any serious fiction writers, these three authors incorporate

cultural symbols into their novels as a means to commentate on the culture's *Zeitgeist*. Regarding

the author's employment of symbols, both generally and the automobile specifically, O'Connor

is representative:

> The mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols
>
> naturally suggest. This is what is meant when critics say that a novel operates on
>
> several levels. The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you, the more meaning it
>
> opens up. To take an example from my own book, *Wise Blood*, the hero's rat-
>
> colored automobile is his pulpit and his coffin as well as something he thinks of
>
> as a means of escape. He is mistaken in thinking that it is a means of escape, of
>
> course, and does not really escape his predicament until the car is destroyed by
>
> the patrolman. The car is a kind of death-in-life symbol, as his blindness is a life-
>
> in-death symbol.[110]

O'Connor notes that the automobile functions, falsely, as a means of escape – or, we might say,

as a means toward the end of freedom, or, release. Therefore, I would argue that the automobile

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[110] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 71-2.

provides the symbolic embodiment of the philosophical ideas related to freedom and autonomy that were discussed in chapter one – to the extent that we can aptly refer to the automobile as a cultural artifact. As a cultural artifact, the automobile offers a point of synthesis between the late eighteenth and nineteenth-century foundations for modern notions of freedom, the three mid twentieth-century novels we are here considering, and the specifically American culture that those authors inhabited.

Radical Freedom in Modern America and the Automobile as Cultural Artifact

As was expressed implicitly in chapter one, it seems evident that Rousseau, Kant, and the Romanticism/German Idealism that flowed from their thought have been foundational for some of the most celebrated ideals in modern society. It is worth noting that, genealogically, America is not exactly a child of the *German* Enlightenment. That is, America's genealogy could not be traced to the idealists, but to political liberalism.[111] Though the founding of America certainly involved the confluence of Christians, Deists, and humanists, America is, at bottom, a child birthed by the Enlightenment. Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood rightly note that America was "founded almost entirely on an Enlightenment basis,"[112] and due to an Enlightenment-influenced American individualism, freedom is no longer "construed as obedience to a *telos* radically

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[111] This by no means strains the importance of chapter one. Elsewhere, Warren Susman has argued that the culture of personality, which certainly has idealist affinities, took shape during the twentieth century in America. And, of course, the rise of Kierkegaard's popularity in the mid twentieth century suggests affinities between Kierkegaard's reaction to the idealists and our concern with modern America. See Warren Susman, "Personality and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture," *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

[112] Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood, "How the Church Became Invisible: A Christian Reading of American Literary Tradition," *Religion and Literature* 38 (2006): 62.

transcending ourselves and thus delivering us from bondage to mere self-interest."[113] Of course,

despite historical and present assertions to the contrary, the influence of ideas is inseparable from

the concrete actuality of their existence. Following James Davison Hunter's masterful

articulation of culture and cultural change, the American ideal of autonomous freedom has not

been merely an intellectual product of worldview persuasion and manipulation. Rather, it has

taken force most prominently within cultural symbols and artifacts, within a matrix of economic

structures, and under the influence of social institutions with varying degrees of cultural

capital.[114] Hence, perhaps the most appropriate approach to considering the influence of

philosophical ideas is not just to assert that they were "in the air," but, rather, to also make a case

for how they were culturally actualized, or, embodied. Perhaps no other cultural artifact

embodies autonomous notions of freedom more eminently than the automobile; one could argue

that no other modern technology further enables and represents this sense of self-sufficient

freedom. Yet, we cannot fully understand how the automobile had such an impact without

understanding the American consumerist use of the American Dream.

     The automobile is a cultural artifact representative of the American *Zeitgeist*, and it

seems evident that the spirit of American culture is one of excessive freedom resulting in

despairing alienation. Yet, to synthesize the full impact of autonomous notions of freedom and

the automobile in American culture, we must consider that this American *Zeitgeist* is reflected in

the notion of the American Dream, and by the incessant disillusionment which this Dream

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[113] Ibid., 65. The way that Hauerwas and Wood describe freedom as "obedience to a telos" that transcends the individual is strikingly similar to Kierkegaard's construal of free human agency as qualified by the agent's submission to necessity.

[114] For a recent and insightful consideration of culture and cultural change, see James Davison Hunter's *To Change the World*. With regard to my summary of Hunter's view of culture, see especially essay one, "Christianity and World Changing." James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World* (New York: Oxford U P, 2010), 6-47.

instills in its hopeful adherents. In short, we could say that a general conception of the American

Dream entails the individual's right to a life of fulfillment, but also that the individual's right to

this full life is linked to his abilities. Thus, there is a sense in which the American Dream offers

the individual fulfillment if he proves himself sufficient to the task of creating his own

possibilities for success. Further, America's economic and advertising culture has (and continues

to) widely monopolized the conception of the full life; according to this dominant conception,

one's fulfillment is primarily constituted by personal prosperity and the ownership of goods.

Thus, three problems, in particular, seem relevant when considering the freedoms enabled by the

automobile within a culture largely defined by the American Dream: mass dislocation,

dehumanizing commodification, and excessive consumption. By "mass dislocation," I mean

simply that many American families consistently uprooted themselves in search of fulfillment

and the identity they wanted for themselves. "Dehumanizing commodification" refers to the

practice of discordantly manipulating private, relational virtues – non-goods – into

commercialized, impersonal utilities. Lastly, by "excessive consumption," I point to the

inordinate desire for fulfillment that ironically works toward the individual's detriment. In terms

of excessive freedom in American culture encouraged by the American Dream, if mass

dislocation is representative of alienation, then the American culture of commodification and

consumption represents the onanistic, instrumental relationships between alienated interlocutors.

Before considering the effects of the automobile on Americans' relationships within the social-

spheres of church, neighborhood, nuclear family, and marriage, we will first consider the

development of the automobile as a cultural artifact in America.

Mid twentieth-century America experienced a boom in automobile sales that seems

attributable to advertisers' ambitious attempts to romanticize the American dream-machine. Rudi

Volti notes that in 1950, America was "the world's largest producer of automobiles, accounting for 82 percent of world output" and could boast "twenty-six cars for every hundred people."[115] One could argue that the increasing mobility of people was bound up with increasing communications. Describing the time as characterized by the mass mobility of people and ideas, Daniel Snowman provides some telling statistics for the mid twentieth-century:

> In 1950 there were five million American families with television sets; in 1960 the figure was 45 million – or well over 95 per cent. In 1950 motor vehicles travelled nearly 460 billion miles in the United States, a figure that had reached nearly 720 billion by the end of the decade; in the same period the number of registered automobiles had shot up from 40.3 million to 61.5 million. The federal and state governments undertook colossal road-building projects during this period (but gave hardly a thought to the great social and aesthetic problems that they were helping to engender and magnify). This was preeminently the era of the motel, of the drive-in movie, the decade in which Kerouac wrote *On the Road* and Nabokov *Lolita*, and in which one American family in five moved each year. It was a decade of huge impersonal new suburbs and of ugly, blighted, old cities.[116]

A boom in television access during the period entailed an increase in both mass communications and the advertisement of goods this afforded. Additionally, increased automobile ownership enabled more people to pursue the American conception of the full life – to acquire commodified goods with a new voracity – in the most desirable location toward achieving this goal. However, essential in understanding what has been problematic in this paradigm of individual fulfillment is

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[115] Rudi Volti, *Cars and Culture: The Life Story of a Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 2004), 89.
[116] Daniel Snowman, *America Since 1920* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 126-7.

that the pursuit of a fulfilling life in these terms has been bound up with the individual's attempt to realize his identity.

Travel has often been romanticized as the opening up of possibilities for the individual. Ronald Primeau notes that travel has been seen as "a way to discover one's real self in a release from everyday constraints."[117] The automobile, however, had its own distinct romanticized vision of travel in American culture. Primeau continues, "The American car has always been more than just transportation: it is status, success, dreams, adventure, mystery, and sex[.]"[118] Further, he credits Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) with culturally codifying the automobile as symbolic of romanticized possibility.[119] What is most curious about this romanticized notion of freedom that the automobile purportedly affords is that the proponents of these transient travels attempt to rebut criticisms of their potentially individualistic nature. Primeau notes that defenders of the road traveler often make assertions such as, "Though the highway quester often drives alone, the trip sooner or later involves a community of fellow travelers with similar goals."[120] Though drivers find in the automobile the opportunity to "renounce home and move from town to town," they can still "experience closeness and community" with potential passengers such as hitchhikers, so that they "are free to develop relationships that are free from the restraints of everyday obligations."[121] For these defenders to simultaneously assert a sense of community alongside avoiding any obligations is, essentially, to make a group of anonymous individuals

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[117] Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1996), 5.
[118] Ibid., 5.
[119] Ibid., 8. It is noteworthy here to notice that it is a *novel* which is credited as responsible for at least popularizing the idea. The inherent influence of the novel on social structures will be further explored in chapter three. Equally noteworthy is that Updike's *Rabbit, Run* is well known as a bit of a response piece to Kerouac's novel and its romanticized premise.
[120] Ibid., 16.
[121] Ibid., 79.

indistinguishable from a community of committed, interconnected individuals. But, perhaps such erroneous assertions can be attributed to the common American attitude of abdication – the call to dissuade criticism of the American way.

It seems that the American culture of abdication and alienation in the twentieth century is attributable to the pursuit of, and vast praise for, self-reliance; that is, not only is alienation the result of devaluing interpersonal reliance, but the high cultural regard for self-reliance as a norm for human agency discourages assertions of its shortcomings. Miller and Novak confirm that "the spread of alienation through American culture was widely ignored. Perhaps the chief factor discouraging its recognition was the consensus fantasy about American culture. It was not a healthy, American act to talk about chaotic concepts like alienation. It was an admission that things were not the simple, pretty picture the fifties imagined."[122] To question the American Dream was to throw into question the validity of one's fantasized possibilities. The authors go on to note that to even "write at all about human alienation in America was to rouse mainstream ire."[123] It seems obvious that this mainstream ire was so prevalent because so much was at stake; the individual identities within the collective group hung in the balance. And to question the American Dream as a paradigm for identity formation was to obviate these individuals' ability – their worth – to achieve their own success and fulfillment. Ironically, if there was widespread unity among Americans toward anything, it was toward ensuring that man would never have to rely on his neighbor. Thus, even the occasional call for Americans to "band together," has typically been in response to potential threats to the culture of desire-fulfillment autonomy – not

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[122] Douglas T. Miller and Marion Novak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1977), 376. Alienation was also a concept to be avoided because it was a Marxian catch-phrase during the mid twentieth century that was often used by and associated with communists. Thus, for many people, alienation was a ideologically combative term.
[123] Ibid., 379.

a call toward undermining its validity. Hence, this avoidance from acknowledging something was amiss in America's cultural structure only perpetuated alienation.

This American culture of self-reliance in pursuit of the full life has inspired a culture of alienation. Philip Slater comments on the increasingly private nature of mid twentieth-century American culture:

> We seek a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it-yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself the task of making it unnecessary for one human being ever to ask anything of another in the course of going about his daily business. Even within the family Americans are unique in their feeling that each member should have a separate room, and even a separate telephone, television, and car, when economically possible. We seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it.[124]

Slater's description describes well the total pursuit of privacy and self-reliance. Yet, it seems that increasing privacy cast fellow human beings in a new light: "We less and less often meet our fellow man to share and exchange, and more and more often encounter him as an impediment or a nuisance: making the highway crowded when we are rushing somewhere."[125] In response to these relational impediments, increasing mobility afforded an ideal solution: elusion. Slater comments that in prospect of difficult situations, people "tended to chuck the whole thing and flee to a new environment. Escaping, evading, and avoiding are responses which lie at the base of much that is peculiarly American – the suburb, the automobile, the self-service store, and so

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[124] Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 7.
[125] Ibid., 7-8.

on."[126] While the suburb and the automobile did provide a preferable alternative to the dehumanizing, claustrophobic atmosphere of the city, the automobile has also been the essential means in modern America for one to escape potential inhibitions to autonomy; that the goals of our technologies have been oriented toward this end has been exceedingly problematic for the relationships necessary for selfhood.[127] Noting the effects of this American notion of freedom, Slater asserts, "One of the major goals of technology in America is to 'free' us from the necessity of relating to, submitting to, depending upon, or controlling other people. Unfortunately, the more we have succeeded in doing this the more we have felt disconnected, bored, lonely, unprotected, unnecessary, and unsafe."[128] The essential contention is this: the disintegration of community life – under the guise of individual "freedom" that seeks individual fulfillment – ironically results in the disintegration of the individual. Because the automobile is the essential cultural embodiment of this irony, the rest of this chapter will be devoted to exploring the connections between the automobile and the dissolution of four communal bodies: the church, the neighborhood, the nuclear family, and marriage.

The Automobile, Alienation, and the Church

In the mid-twentieth century, one particular factor motivating a glossy view of American culture was a peculiar syncretism between many religious establishments and the multifarious institutions that pushed the American Dream. The President of the mid-twentieth century, Dwight D. Eisenhower, was instrumental in establishing this American/religious syncretism in

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[126] Ibid., 14.

[127] Here, I am suggesting agreement with Hegel, and with Kierkegaard via Judge William (see chapter one): significant committed relationships are undoubtedly necessary in the forming and sustaining of one's identity and personal fulfillment.

[128] Ibid., 26.

new ways. Miller and Novak note that Eisenhower once began a crusade by opining,

"Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first, the most basic, expression of Americanism.

Without God, there could be no American form of government, nor an American way of life."[129]

In 1954, Eisenhower influenced the addition of "Under God" to America's pledge of allegiance,

and two years later he also influenced the adoption of "In God We Trust" as an American motto.

However, Gary Cross shows how neither party to this syncretistic civil religion could avoid the

temptation of self-interest; he notes that while the founding fathers understood the necessity of

self-control for the success of the country, they still

> came close to accepting the notion that the individual could be defined by rational
>
> choice in fulfilling personal desires. Complementing this was an evangelical
>
> tradition that emphasized personal religious experience over doctrine or ritual. . . .
>
> [T]his sentiment easily slid into the dream of self-transforming spending. The
>
> end-all of life was personal satisfaction. Americans found it easy to identify
>
> society with the market where individual desires were fulfilled and where people
>
> related to each other through exchanging and displaying their goods.[130]

Inherent in Cross' description is a transition that occurred in many churches from preaching rigid

doctrinal truths to entering the fray of desire-fulfillment, forming an unholy amalgamation

between the faithful and the American Dream. However, this transition meant that the church

was entering the fray of competition and consumption where a rooted church community would

have to compete with the possibilities offered by mobility – or, what many Americans were

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[129] Miller and Novak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, 85.
[130] Gary S. Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commericialism Won in Modern America* (New York: Columbia U P, 2000), 112.

treating as the highway of "sacred space."[131]

When it came to the business of desire-fulfillment, the church seems, to some extent, to have been unable to compete with the forms of immediate fulfillment afforded by the automobile. People were finding better ways to spend their Sunday afternoons. In research done by Robert and Helen Lynd, one female respondent commented that her husband "don't like to go to church Sunday night. We've been away from church this summer more'n ever since we got our car," while another woman said, "In the summer we'd rather get out in the car, because we've only the one free day during the week."[132] The problem seems to have been a common one, for the same study found one pastor of a "business class church" drawing lines in the sand over absentee church members: "I do not need to lecture you people who are here, but the people who call themselves Christian who are today motoring and playing golf, who will not see the inside of a church today, they are traitors to the kingdom of God."[133] In what could be seen as a hopeful response (though certainly an odd one) to these absentee "motorists," several "drive-in churches" began to appear. Miller and Novak describe these motorist congregations: "Even drive-in churches appeared, modeled on the success of drive-in movies. One Presbyterian drive-in in Venice, Florida, offered to carry the communion grape juice to those cars whose passengers were unable to walk to the communion table."[134] Another interesting popular-culture synthesis between evangelist and automobile occurred when Billy Graham's publicist – in response to the simple use of understated advertisements for the famous traveling evangelist – used a telling analogy: "When you see an advertisement for a Cadillac, it just says Cadillac and shows you a

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[131] Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway*, 1.

[132] Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrell Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (New York: Harcourt, 1956), 362.

[133] Ibid., 322.

[134] Miller and Novak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, 87.

picture. Billy is like a Cadillac. We don't have to explain."[135] Presumably, the traveling

preacher's image was self-sufficient enough to draw hoards of people. Whatever the motivations

or implications of "drive-in churches" or America's most prominent preacher being compared to

a Cadillac, the overall impact of the automobile on community life, as Snowman notes, was

undisputed: the automobile, considered within the context of the American Dream, was

responsible for "reduced church attendance" and broken families.[136] While the automobile had

some transformative effects on the church's community life, its increasing popularity also had

some destructive implications for traditional neighborhood life.

The Automobile, Alienation, and the Neighborhood

Widespread dependence upon the automobile resulted in transient neighborhoods and

reflected a new paradigm for identity formation within these fragmented communities. The

automobile, of course, is substantially responsible for the formation of suburban neighborhoods.

However, despite the convenience these neighborhoods may have afforded them, suburbanites

retained a particular desire for belonging due to the nature of their communities. Miller and

Novak comment that "[o]ne of the main reasons for the frantic 'belongingness' in suburbia was

the rootlessness most people felt. These were transient communities. Not only was everyone a

newcomer, but few expected to remain in one place long since corporate policy prescribed

frequent transfers of personnel[.]"[137] Suburban neighborhoods were inhabited by people who had

not laid down roots long enough to establish worthwhile commitments to one another. And it

should be noted that what was partly underlying this transience was the instrumental relationship

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[135] Ibid., 99.
[136] Snowman, *America Since 1920*, 30.
[137] Miller and Novak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, 135-6.

between the triumvirate of corporation/business, dream-pursuing worker, and the dream-pursuing consumers who were dependent upon the relationship between the former two. However, not only did the automobile enable these fragmented suburban neighborhoods, it also had a disintegrating effect on both city and country life. Miller and Novak assert that the automobile was "the single greatest factor in subverting the virtues of both city and countryside[.] . . . Cars had made suburban escape possible, but at a very heavy price. . . . General Motors triumphed over common sense and the result was smog, creeping bumper-to-bumper traffic, decaying cities, divided by freeways, despoiled landscapes, time payments, and often early death."[138] Thus, whether the suburbs, the city, or the country side, neighborhood life in America was largely decaying, and in decline. Slater, who was certainly no adherent to the American culture of abdication, puts the situation rather bluntly:

> The automobile . . . did more than anything else to destroy community life in America. It segmented the various parts of the community and scattered them about so that they became unfamiliar with one another. It isolated travelers and decoordinated the movement of people from one place to another. It isolated and shrank living units to the point where the skills involved in informal cooperation among large groups of people atrophied and were lost. As the community became a less and less satisfying and pleasurable place to be, people more and more took to their automobiles as an escape from it. This in turn crowded the roads more which generated more road-building which destroyed more communities, and so on.[139]

Such widespread dependence upon the automobile not only had a decaying effect on

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[138] Ibid., 139.

[139] Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, 131-2.

neighborhoods and communities at large, but also reflected a paradigm shift in identity formation

that resulted in new ways for individuals to interact with one another within their neighborly

communities.

More motorists necessitated changes in neighborhoods that resulted in new ways of

people relating to one another that are telling with regard to the nature of an overly

individualistic identity in American culture. The notion of the individual's "belonging" has most

traditionally been defined by his relational commitments; however, transient, disconnected

neighborhoods introduced new forms of identity and ways of belonging. Robert and Helen Lynd

note that neighbors no longer "spend long summer evenings and Sunday afternoons on the porch

or in the side yard since the advent of the automobiles and the movies. These factors tend to

make a decorative yard less urgent; the make of one's car is rivaling the looks of one's place as

an evidence of one's 'belonging.'"[140] Car garages make both front porches and neighborly

interaction less likely; and the individual no longer finds identity in these neighborly

relationships, but instead feels at home in the competition inherent in the culture of consumption

and commodification which is manifested in the individual displaying his new car for his

neighbors to see. In this sense, the competitor becomes an instrumental relationship toward the

individual's fulfillment. In an observation that is at once humorous and frightening, Slater notes

that these instrumental relationships are, in a sense, governed by machines that perpetuate

instrumentality: "[T]here is no way for large numbers of people to coexist without governing and

being governed by each other, unless they establish machines to do it; at which point they risk

losing sight and understanding of interconnectedness itself – a process well advanced in our

culture today. There is something wildly comic about cars stopping and starting in response to a

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[140] Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, 95.

traffic light, for example, but most Americans have lost the capacity to experience it."[141]

Naturally, the result of this situation has been to gather up the people incapable of independence and group them together; this, in the end – or, perhaps more precisely, *as* an end toward the culture of autonomous desire-fulfillment – seems like the most instrumental thing to do. Disintegrating churches and decaying neighborhoods denote that new levels of pressure were heaped upon the nuclear family toward its own self-sustainment. Yet, as we will see, neither the nuclear family nor the marital relationship could withstand the undermining effects of the automobile within an American society situated toward the pursuit of autonomous fulfillment, and predominately characterized by instrumental relationships toward that end.

The Automobile, Alienation, and the Nuclear Family

In the middle of the twentieth century, the nuclear family also started to experience the disintegration of its communal life due to the freedom enabled by the automobile. Arguably since, and as a result of, the Reformation, one unique characteristic of modern society is the autonomous nuclear family; yet, it was also typically the norm for this autonomous nuclear family – even if self-directing – to be interconnected with a community greater than itself, providing a background for both sustainment and self-understanding. Yet, with this background fading, an expanding pressure was placed on the nuclear family to be wholly self-sustaining and self-defining. Beth Bailey notes that many social scientists have pointed out that, in the twentieth century, the nuclear family is no longer "surrounded by the protection of the kinship group, the church, the school and the neighborhood. . . . It seemed clear to [them] that the American family

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[141] Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, 149.

had been undermined."[142] Certainly, much of this undermining effect can be attributed to sociological changes that accompanied technological change in the twentieth century. Miller and Novak note that technological changes leading up to the fifties created sweeping changes in societal views of marriage, domesticity, family life, and home life – changes which resulted in the spread of instability, anxiety, and uncertainty.[143] Of course, these technological changes enabled increased mobility for families – so much so for families during the fifties that Cross describes American families treating homes "like cars, objects to be traded in."[144] Again, families no doubt connected this mobility with the romanticized possibility enabled by travel. Robert and Helen Lynd note that advertisers, banking on the American Dream, sold this sense of self re-creation with vigor to families: "Meanwhile, advertisements pound away at Middletown people with the tempting advice to spend money for automobiles for the sake of their homes and families: 'Hit the trail to better times!' says one such advertisement."[145] The chance for a better life at the end of mobility was not just sold to families, but it was sold to them *for the sake* of their families – posing the potential move firmly as an ethical situation. The social life of the family was, to some extent, centered on the family automobile. Yet, the automobile did not just lead to autonomous families increasingly evading the rootedness of community life; it also led to increasing autonomy among the individual members of the nuclear family – particularly its teenagers.

When the American nuclear family, pursuing romanticized possibility with new abandon, allowed itself to be tossed to and fro by consumer society, it was only a matter of time until the

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[142] Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1988), 120.
[143] Miller and Novak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were*, 148.
[144] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, 91.
[145] Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, 256.

individual members of that nuclear family would pursue their own self-fulfilling goals – even if in defiance, or to the detriment, of the family as a whole. Cross rightly notes that the "privacy and the freedom of the car culture complemented the consumerist nest of the home, but it also threatened to make the family house merely a launching pad for individual networking."[146] This individual networking seems evident in at least two particular ways. A pair of critics note that the automobile "is making noticeable inroads upon the traditional prestige of the family's meal times" and "has done much to render obsolete the leisurely Sunday noon dinner of a generation ago at which extra leaves had to be put in the table for the company of relatives and friends[.]"[147] Traditional times devoted to the giving and sharing of food, conversation, and intimacy in general no longer retained the same importance it once held for the nuclear family. Increasing the devaluation of meal times was the absence of relatives who were lost in frequent moves. Cross notes that this increased mobility "compounded the loss of daily contact with and advice from relatives about child rearing and marriage."[148] The convergence of these two losses – relatives in the extended family and the wisdom they often bestow, and the intimacy-building at meal times – no doubt played a negative role in the development of the children who were the future of American society. And often the children themselves were the ones absent from the dinner table. Robert and Helen Lynd comment on the influence of the automobile and the freedom it gave to children in the nuclear family:

> The extensive use of this new tool by the young has enormously extended their
> mobility and the range of alternatives before them; joining a crowd motoring over
> to dance in a town twenty miles away may be a matter of moment's decision, with

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[146] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, 104.
[147] Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, 153.
[148] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, 97.

no one's permission asked. Furthermore, among the high school set, ownership of a car by one's family has become an important criterion of social fitness: a boy almost never takes a girl to a dance except in a car; there are persistent rumors of the buying of a car by local families to help their children's social standing in high school.[149]

The automobile seems to allow teenagers to inhabit a culture of their own – wholly separate from their families. Further, the paradigm for identity formation that involves the fulfillment of displaying new goods to one's peers seems to have been not only true for parents with their neighbors, but also to have been reproduced in their children. Young adults gained identity affirmation from their peers on the basis of automobile ownership. Cross comments that as early as the twenties, "young Americans bought [automobiles] and won freedom from their families. Seldom had anything like this ever happened in the history of the family. Prosperity and permissive parenting encouraged a youth consumer culture that seemed to open the floodgates of sexuality and carefree spending."[150] Here, we can begin to gain a full picture of an American setting against which people, young adults included, are governed by a debased notion of autonomy that is fueled by the American Dream of self-sufficiency in hasty pursuit of self-fulfillment. However, a collapsing community life involved the slow decay of responsibility. Freedom – not qualified by social/ethical commitments, but from them – had debilitating effects on intimate relationships between men and women inside and outside of the context of marital union.

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[149] Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, 137.

[150] Cross, *An All-Consuming Century: Why Commercialism Won in Modern America*, 104.

The Automobile, Alienation, and Marriage/Sexuality

In an exceedingly consumerist American culture, the automobile came to be identified with sexuality, and had the dehumanizing effect of perpetuating the commodification of women. Thus, instrumentality no longer solely characterized relationships between consumer and business, but increasingly characterized our more intimate relationships. Yet, this consumerist mentality did not just involve commodifying people, but it also involved sexualizing sexless objects, with the latter trend perpetuating the former. As usual, Slater provides both an adept analysis of the last century's trends and a prescient warning of their ends:

> The fundamental mechanism for generating sexual scarcity is to attach sexual interest to inaccessible, nonexistent, or irrelevant objects; and for this purpose man's capacity to symbolize is perfectly designed. Today this basic technique has become the dominant one. By the time an American boy or girl reaches maturity he or she has so much symbolic baggage attached to the sexual impulse that the mere mutual stimulation of two human bodies seems almost meaningless. Through the mass media everything sexless has been sexualized: automobiles, cigarettes, detergents, clothing.[151]

Sexualizing a sexless object – like the automobile – had two effects: (1) It devalued the worth of sexual beings by objectifying them and, therefore, (2) it also devalued the worth of sexuality in general by making it an object of utility. Bailey describes one simile that was used which seems to reflect this trend: "'He takes her out . . . like he takes out his new car, but more impersonally, because the car is his for good but the girl is his only for the evening.' In fact, the equation of women and cars was common in mid-century American culture. Both were property, both

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[151] Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness: American Culture at the Breaking Point*, 85.

expensive . . . and both could be judged on performance."[152] Further, the equation of women and

automobiles was not merely women in general, but also wives in particular. In a 1951 *Time*

magazine piece, two males described the relationship between men and women before and after

marriage in terms of being like an automobile: "Before the property is yours, I don't see why

anybody can't use it. . . . After marriage some guy taking my wife would be like taking my car

and putting on a few extra miles. It might improve through use, but I like to drive my own."[153]

Despite any semblance of ethical responsibility implied by the statement, the nature of the

particular simile was an incongruence that went unnoticed in the article.

One devastating effect attendant to the objectification of women and the collapse of

larger communities is the undermining of intimacy between couples. Robert and Helen Lynd

point out that the loss of a "community of interests, together with the ideas each sex entertains

regarding the other, appears in many families in a lack of frankness between husband and wife,

far-reaching in its emotional outcome."[154] An example characterized by mutual objectification

and a lack of intimacy between parents set the standard for their motoring teenagers, who were in

the process of creating their own community separate from family life. It is no wonder that,

against this background situation, "intimacy" slowly degenerated toward being synonymous with

sexuality.

With increased automobile ownership came new freedom for young adults, creating a

new paradigm for courtship in America. Bailey notes that "[y]oung men and women went out

into the world *together*, enjoying a new kind of companionship and the intimacy of a new kind of

freedom from adult supervision," and Bailey goes on to concede that the "automobile certainly

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[152] Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, 69-70.
[153] Ibid., 70.
[154] Robert and Helen Lynd, *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture*, 120.

contributed to the rise of dating as a *national* practice."[155] Yet, this new kind of "intimacy" resulting from new freedoms could – in many cases, it seems – scarcely be identified as authentic intimacy. The new paradigm for courtship – "dating" – was characterized by social distance and anonymity. Bailey explains, "In twentieth-century America, courtship became more and more a private act conducted in the public world. This intimate business, as it evolved into 'dating,' increasingly took place in public places removed, by distance and by anonymity, from the sheltering and controlling contexts of home and local community."[156] Hence, the prevailing norm for "intimate relationships" was constituted by distance from the communities that traditionally helped foster identity and responsibility, and by entrance into a public community constituted by anonymity. However, not only did this emerging form of courtship signal a shift from community ties to public anonymity, it also – because of the consumerist nature of the public sphere – "privileged competition" and "valued consumption." Here, again, it would not take much for the nature of this dating scene – constituted by competition and consumption – to have an undermining effect on the intimacy between the two persons. The woman was a good to be consumed at the cost of a night motoring about in the town; the man's value was determined by what material fulfillment he could purchase, and the woman's value was determined by the sexual fulfillment she could provide. Roaming freely from the family, the dating relationship, with its instrumental fulfillments, was both autonomous and inter-manipulative. As *Mademoiselle* and the *New York Times Magazine* can attest, the car came to function as a make-shift bed:

> A short story in *Mademoiselle* describes 'college girl cars with boxes of tissues
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> and clean seat covers that were parked in the lot behind the dormitories' where the

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[155] Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth-Century America*, 19.
[156] Ibid., 3.

student couple made love. But many colleges and universities had regulations

against students having cars. In 1963, students at a Midwestern university

launched a campaign against this restriction. One male student told the *New York*

Times Magazine that the issue wasn't transportation but privacy: 'We wouldn't

care if the cars had no wheels, just so long as they had doors.'[157]

Intimacy came less to be defined by the *knowledge* one could learn about another person –

particularly the knowledge gained from the familiarity with one's family and *home* life. Instead,

the kind of "intimacy" fostered was the knowledge of one's wallet and one's body. And this

intimacy occurred in the anonymous public sphere where two persons were freer to project a

created public personality to one another, even if it was disparate from the private person. An

"esthete" could not have found a more favorable companion or culture to his onanistic

manipulations than the automobile within modern America.

Conclusion

The automobile – particularly within the context of the mid-twentieth century – was a

cultural artifact in American culture because it both enabled and represented expanding

American freedoms, while also fostering widespread possibility for alienation. Yet, what has

hopefully been evident in this culturual/contextual consideration of the automobile is that neither

the freedoms granted by the automobile nor the freedoms granted by the American constitution

should be vilified; rather, the human agents who were afforded these freedoms lost sight of the

necessarily interpersonal nature of their own identities, and, thus, increasingly submitted to a

culture of self-indulgence. However, declining relational commitments have fostered declining

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[157] Ibid., 86-7.

intimacy and moral responsibility between people. And this onanistic, self-reliant search for fulfillment has ironically contributed to the eroding alienation of the individual. Here, again, it seems evident that the radical individualism underlying Kantian autonomy must be called into question, for the form of autonomy advocated and exhibited in American life has been increasingly immoral or amoral – and, this, in spite of flourishing education. Yet, despite the problems which have accompanied mid twentieth-century American culture, and have seemingly only progressed to our present day, a growing body of literature has arisen in the last half-century that has called into question our individualistic culture and the philosophy it was largely founded upon. This body of socio-philosophical literature is, broadly speaking, characterized by a *communitarian* approach to identity – and this is where we turn to in the third and final chapter of part one.

Part 1, Chapter 3

A Novel Science for Late Moderns: Situating the Self in Communal Narrative

Introduction

In the last half-century, a body of literature has arisen that I am going to loosely refer to as "communitarian." In using the term, which has both social and political connotations, I am referring to critics who have both recognized the ultimately individualistic nature of American culture, and have sought, in various ways, the reaffirmation of man's communal nature. On these terms, the literary works we are concerned with here – O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Percy's *The Moviegoer*, and Updike's *Rabbit, Run* – indirectly affirm the need for communal commitments in their depictions of autonomous, alienated protagonists. Yet, I would argue that these depictions ultimately lack any positive affirmation of life together. Percy, who assembled an impressive body of literature devoted to semiotic theory, was no doubt in search of community;[158] thus, his non-fiction, more exclusively than O'Connor's or Updike's, will be considered in this chapter. Regarding Percy's sense that moderns lacked a genuine sense of community, John Desmond notes, "With increasing insistence and directness, Percy's novels record this search for community. Both sides of the issue – alienation and separateness, hope and the possibility for communication – reflect the spirit of Percy's obsession . . . with community throughout his career as a writer."[159] Indeed, Percy's assertions regarding the mysterious nature of language provide important critiques of autonomous agency – as does *The Moviegoer*, along

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[158] The most complete and sophisticated consideration of Walker Percy and community is found in John F. Desmond's aptly titled *Walker Percy's Search for Community*. Desmond's work points to the need to consider Percy's non-fiction work in this chapter.

[159] John F. Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 2004), 3.

with the other two novels we are concerned with here, in their depictions. As will be explored

below, novelistic depictions are helpful because the alienated self must be situated within a

narrative, but meaningful narratives are necessarily communal; while all three authors' Christian

commitments – and the inherently narratival nature of novel writing in general – allow

O'Connor, Percy, and Updike to indirectly depict the need for community life, the content of

their novels ultimately lacks any faithful, positive affirmations of authentic community – and this

lack of affirmation leaves the depictions of redemption in their novels ultimately wanting.

The Self's Situation in Narrative

Rather than considering the self as autonomous – or, self-directing and self-governing on

the basis either of reason or desire-fulfillment – it is helpful to consider modern man's identity as

needing situated within the context of narrative structure. Among the three primary authors,

Percy, due to his distinctive search for community, seems to recognize intuitively the importance

of narrative when he says that what interested him was not "the physiological and pathological

processes within man's body, but the problem of man himself, *the nature and destiny of man*;

specifically and more immediately, *the predicament of man* in a modern technological

society."[160] Understanding man as in pursuit of a destiny or encountering predicament is

certainly elemental of narrative structure. Perhaps no recent thinker has better articulated the

need to understand one's identity as situated within narrative than Charles Taylor.

Taylor has provided worthwhile commentary regarding man's imperative to understand

his life as in pursuit of meaning – or, of making sense of things. Further, the self must be situated

within an overall understanding of life that articulates what is of worth. In *Sources of the Self:*

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[160] Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 188. Emphasis added.

The Making of the Modern Identity, Taylor argues that man necessarily understands his life as a pursuit of meaningfulness, which necessarily requires dialogical interaction: "[A] framework is that in virtue of which we make sense of our lives spiritually. Not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless. The quest is thus always a quest for sense. But the invocation of meaning also comes from our awareness of how much the search involves articulation. . . . Finding a sense to life depends on framing meaningful expressions."[161] Life demands that some semblance of coherence is available, for the recognition that one's life lacks orderliness is conceived against the implicit understanding that coherence is attainable. However, a framework for understanding what is meaningful necessarily involves differentiation between what is good and what is not. Therefore, Taylor rightly notes that "doing without frameworks is utterly impossible for us[.] . . . [T]he horizons within which we live our lives and which make sense of them have to include these strong qualitative discriminations," and to avoid recognizing that a strongly qualitative framework is constitutive of human agency "would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood."[162] That is, the human agent articulates that which is of worth, and this necessarily involves taking on particular commitments to the exclusion of others on the basis of differentiated value. A powerful company owner divorces his wife because she complains that he is not home enough; he values his work to such an extent that he is willing to allow his marriage to dissolve. The shape of his life is defined by his commitments to work, business successes, and the pride attendant to the achievements of the work-a-day world. We can begin to see that Taylor is articulating a sense of identity which is understood analogically in spatial terms:

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[161] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1989), 17-8.
[162] Ibid., 27.

Who am I? But this can't necessarily be answered by giving name and genealogy.

What does answer this question for us is an understanding of what is of critical

importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My

identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the

frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is

good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other

words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.[163]

Taylor's description of identity as understood against a horizon of significance is helpful toward

understanding what we mean when we say that one has an identity crisis, or when some critics

have asserted that an essential feature of modernity is widespread disorientation. Taylor goes on

to say that this disorientation is expressed by people in terms of "not knowing who they are, but

which can also be seen as a radical uncertainty of where they stand."[164] Thus, disorientation is

the result of not merely a predicament encountered, but, rather, an incoherent sense of situation –

or narrative – altogether by which the predicament can make sense. And without this coherence,

the individual experiences an inability to process and transcend predicaments.

Thus far, following Taylor, we have come to see identity as necessarily involving a

coherent sense of orientation to that which is of worth; because orientation fundamentally

involves understanding what has gone before, what is happening, and what is to come, we could

say that one achieves a sense of identity within a narrative understanding of his life. Taylor

summarizes the point:

The issue of our condition can never be exhausted for us by what we *are*, because

we are always also changing and *becoming*. . . . I have been arguing that in order

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[163] Ibid., 27.
[164] Ibid., 27.

> to make minimal sense of our lives, in order to have an identity, we need an
> orientation to the good, which means some sense of qualitative discrimination, of
> the incomparably higher. Now we see this sense of the good has to be woven into
> my understanding of my life as an unfolding story. But this is to state another
> basic condition of making sense of ourselves, that we grasp our lives in a
> *narrative*.[165]

Identity involves a continuous state of becoming, because one's identity is based on one's commitments and the outcomes of those commitments. Further, not only do these commitments entail moral articulations – qualitative discriminations of what is good or bad or worthwhile – but the effectiveness of these commitments in the past, and the projection of our choices' outcomes into the future, can only be understood within a sense of story. Returning to the example above, the businessman who has chosen his job over his wife may remember the hastiness in which he married her, or he may project a future that involves company expansion and a date with his secretary. His narrative sense of the past and the future, based on his commitments, fundamentally shapes his decision to end the marriage. That is, regardless of the merit of his choices and whether or not he realizes it, the businessman is living a narrative that is shaped by actions which involve his qualitative discriminations. With narrative, we have understood the formal shape of identity, and now we want to retrieve a qualitative sense of identity, or, what is involved in character – that quality of being which both inhabits narrative and infuses it with qualitative action.

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[165] Ibid., 47.

The Loss of Character

Before considering James Davison Hunter's more elaborate elucidation of the nature of

character, it will be helpful to consider whether the modern, autonomous self coheres with

narrative and character – or, with the sense of story that long predates modern selfhood. The

modern's sense of freedom is constituted by contractural rights and the notion that others must

respect his personality. Taylor notes that "[t]o talk of universal, natural, or human rights is to

connect respect for human life and integrity with the notion of autonomy. . . . And for us

respecting personality involves as a crucial feature respecting the person's moral autonomy."[166]

Taylor continues, saying, "[T]his expands to the demand that we give people the freedom to

develop their personality in their own way, however repugnant to ourselves and even to our

moral sense."[167] But, what precisely is personality, and how does it differ from character? Hunter

considers "personality" the modern version of the self – a replacement of "character" that first

came on the scene in the late eighteenth century, but came into prominence in the early twentieth

century: "The concept of personality reflected a self no longer defined by austerity but by

emancipation for the purposes of expression, *fulfillment*, and gratification."[168] Hence we might

say that the modern psychologized self is characterized by excessive freedom for the purposes of

personal fulfillment and gratification; however, the irony is that this characterization actually

undercuts character much in the same way that onanistic relief undercuts fulfilling intimacy.

Commenting on the nature of the modern Self (Hunter capitalizes "Self" – presumably intending

to implicate its divinization in modern times), Hunter says, "The implications are simultaneously

liberating and disturbing. There is unprecedented individual freedom that few would be willing

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[166] Ibid., 12.

[167] Ibid., 12.

[168] James Davison Hunter, *The Death of Character: On the Moral Education of America's Children* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), 7. Emphasis added.

to relinquish. But there is also a license that disparages self-restraint and responsibility toward others. This ambivalence is an inescapable feature of our time."[169] The constituents of one's identity which Taylor noted – that man is partly constituted by his commitments and relationships to others – are here undermined by a codified modern identity that gives excessive license to rights that emphasize emancipation. That is, it seems that this modern self – the personality – is fundamentally constituted in such a way that severely stultifies itself because it devalues significant commitments which entail responsibility. Here, we are again confronted with the problems associated with an understanding of human agency which grants the self moral legislation.

There is a sense in which we understand character to be forged by the outside circumstances that we encounter. Tellingly, Hunter attributes the death of character to the rejection of externally imposed norms of conduct in favor of internally chosen values: "[T]he demise of character begins with the destruction of creeds, the convictions, and the 'god-terms' that made those creeds sacred to us and inviolable within us. This destruction occurs simultaneously with the rise of 'values.' Values are truths that have been deprived of their commanding character. They are substitutes for revelation, imperatives that have dissolved into a range of possibilities."[170] Hunter's description brings to mind the story presented in chapter one involving the battle between Kant and Hamann at the end of the seventeenth century. When character is disconnected from the commanding imperative inherent in authoritative revelation, it dissolves into transient values that involve the self's choices, which typically serve only to comport with the personality's day-to-day whim. Kant, as we saw, has been most criticized for the lack of sufficient moral motivation in his conception of autonomy; yet, on Hunter's terms,

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[169] Ibid., xiv.
[170] Ibid., xiii.

character is essentially implausible apart from the revelation that Hamann firmly advocated. While Kant by no means advocated autonomy based on unfettered desire, many critics have drawn a bit of a historical line from Kant to Nietzche, and Hunter seems to affirm the plausibility of this line when he defines nihilism as unfettered autonomous desire:

> I define nihilism as autonomous desire and unfettered will legitimated by the ideology and practice of choice. I don't want to be misunderstood here. The power of self-determination is, of course, our reigning definition of freedom, and such freedom can indeed be liberating. For many, and not least the powerless and disadvantaged and oppressed minorities, such freedoms are rare and cherished, and one can only hope that they will expand. The problem, then, is not with the freedom of will as such, but rather its autonomy from any higher value.[171]

If the modern's conception of freedom and selfhood ultimately flattens out into nothingness, then clearly we have lost a sense of character that needs to be retrieved – a retrieval that begins with understanding what it means, more precisely, to act with character.

In our culture's present situation, the most basic element of character in need of recovery is a collective understanding of freedom that defines what one is rightfully unable to do. Hunter asserts that "[t]o have a renewal of character is to have a renewal of a creedal order that constrains, limits, binds, obligates, and compels," but, instead, "[w]e want character . . . without unyielding conviction; we want strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt or shame; we want virtue but without particular moral justifications that invariably offend; we want good without having to name evil; we want decency without the authority to insist upon it."[172] Hunter's assertion is reminiscent of Flannery O'Connor's comment in the introduction to the

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[171] Ibid., 211.
[172] Ibid., xv.

second edition of *Wise Blood* that was mentioned in the beginning of chapter one, but bears

repeating: "Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do?"[173] It is helpful to consider

the term *integrity* extricated from its typically platitudinous iterations; at its root, integrity

involves a sense of unified wholeness. Thus, we could say that, according to O'Connor and

Hunter, a sense of restriction is necessary toward being fully human. Of course, this more

extensive understanding of the inextricability of freedom and justice necessitates that character

be confirmed outside of the self; it requires an authority other than the self because it now seems

evident that the self is incapable of restricting itself authoritatively. Hunter alludes to this when

he says that character is constituted by sociality.[174] Yet, it seems evident that moderns would

cringe at the idea of a "command theory" of identity[175] – which is an understandable recoil given

the corrupting nature of power.

Thus far, we have emphasized the commanding nature of character which is necessary for

a full sense of human identity. A common and understandable objection to a "command" is that

its coercive nature can often assert itself without proper explication of its necessity. Yet, if these

commands – authoritative on the basis of revelation – are understood as essential to a fulfilling

and holistic identity, then it behooves us to not just propose particular qualities of character that

carry commanding weight, but to better articulate the basis of their authority in relation to

humanity's well being. Hunter notes that "morality includes the *explanations* that give these

codes coherence and authority for the individual and the community. It is in this way that culture

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[173] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 115.
[174] Hunter, *The Death of Character*, 15.
[175] Here, I am loosely referring to what is known as "divine command theory" – the meta-ethical idea that implicit in the universal understanding that "love is good" or "murder is bad" is that God commands love and forbids murder. My looseness in simply saying "command theory" is tied to Hunter's looseness in simply saying that we need to recover the sense of inextricable authority implicit in these rights and wrongs.

becomes authoritative. Morality demands, requires, expects of people, but in a way that seems natural and logical to them."[176] Following Hunter, the form of character – commitments to an exterior moral code that is binding and authoritative – necessarily requires us to be explicit about the content of character; that is, it requires us to articulate what we are committed to with regard to goodness, and to provide more definitive definitions of freedom and justice that cause the two to cohere in a more fulfilling and reconciliatory way. Hunter provides a lengthy summation of what is involved in character that is worth quoting in full, because it brings the retrieval of character full circle in relation to Taylor's situation of identity within narrative:

> Implicit in the word 'character' is a story. It is a story about living for a purpose that is greater than the self. Though this purpose resides deeply within, its origins are outside the self and so it beckons one forward, channeling one's passions to mostly quiet acts of devotion, heroism, sacrifice, and achievement. These purposes, and the narrative in which they are embedded, translate character into destiny. In so doing they also establish the horizons of the moral imagination – the expanse of the good that can be envisioned. The moral excellencies of character, then, are not the end toward which one strives but rather a means. At the same time, the moral disciplines within which one is habitualized *are* enactments of the purposes to which one is called, embodiments of the vision to which one is committed. The vision itself is imbued with a quality of sacredness. The standards by which one lives and the purposes to which one aspires have a coherence and an inviolability about them and they beckon ever forward . . . but never alone. The story implicit within the word 'character' is one that is shared, it

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[176] Ibid., 16.

is never just for the isolated individual. The narrative integrates the self within

communal purposes binding dissimilar others to common ends. Character outside

of a lived community, the entanglements of complex social relationships, and

their shared story, is impossible.[177]

To be a self is to be involved with – bound and committed to – others. And, as it turns out, the

submission of one's self to this communal story, is not, in the grand scheme of the narrative,

restricting of the self's freedom, but provides boundaries for the imagination that actually infuse

it with a new, more refined expanse of possibilities. If, however, this story or narrative which the

self is communally situated in relies on sense or meaning, then it is a story that must involve a

robust theory of language that moves beyond behaviorism, and allows for grammars that allow

faithful reconciliation between self and other.

The Nature of Language as it Relates to Freedom and Alienation

Many of the themes we have been considering thus far – *community*, *narrative*, *story*,

sense, *meaning* – center around that which is most mysterious about man because it most eludes

naturalistic explanations: language. Undoubtedly, if we are to consider a communal

understanding of free human agency, then this consideration requires that we address the nature

of language as it relates to the aforementioned themes. Of course, our primary concern remains

the two polarities of alienation and community, and their relation to the human agent's freedom

and authenticity. Taylor provides a substantive starting point when he elucidates the incoherence

of authenticity constituted by individually created meanings:

Briefly, we can say that authenticity (A) involves (i) creation and construction as

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[177] Ibid., 226-7.

well as discovery, (ii) originality, and frequently (iii) opposition to the rules of society and even potentially to what we recognize as morality. But it is also true, as we saw, that it (B) requires (i) openness to horizons of significance (for otherwise the creation loses the background that can save it from insignificance) and (ii) a self-definition in dialogue. That these demands may be in tension has to be allowed. But what must be wrong is a simple privileging of one over the other, of (A), say, at the expense of (B), or vice versa. This is what the trendy doctrines of 'deconstruction' involve today. They stress (A.i), the constructive, creative nature of our expressive languages, while altogether forgetting (B.i). And they capture the extremer forms of (A.iii), the amoralism of creativity, while forgetting (B.ii), its dialogical setting, which binds us to others. There is something incoherent about this.[178]

Thus, there is a sense in which language mirrors activity in terms of the modern's emphasis on unfettered creativity and possibility. In short, language has been widely considered, wittingly or not, more autonomously designative than communally expressive. On the autonomous-designative model, the definitions of freedom, character, and identity can be individually projected. Taylor identifies Augustine as providing one of the earliest articulations of an expressive theory of meaning, according to which God is an expressivist and "the world is a meaningful order, or a text. This kind of view of the world is dominant right up to the seventeenth century, when it was pulverized in the scientific revolution."[179] Flowing from this theistically expressive ontology has been what Taylor refers to as "semiological ontologies."[180]

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[178] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1991), 66-7.
[179] Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (New York: Cambridge U P, 1985), 223.
[180] Ibid., 223.

On this view, broadly speaking, the world of things embodies ideas that posit a sense of being in the world; or, we might say that the earth has a particular significance about it that shapes our cognizance and, thus, our languages. But, here, contra the designative view of language, the expressive view recognizes that the cosmos shape us.

Over against the expressive view of language is the more recent and fashionable designative view of language that developed in the seventeenth century. Taylor tellingly describes this designative view: "Language for the theory of these centuries is an instrument of *control* in the assemblage of ideas which is thought or mental discourse. It is an instrument of control in gaining knowledge of the world as objective process. And so it must be perfectly transparent; it cannot itself be the locus of mystery[.]"[181] Based on what we have considered thus far, it comes as no surprise that aggression toward the expressive view derives from the modern's grab for radically independent freedom. On the designative view, to take on the expressive theory of language is "to lose control, to slip into a kind of slavery; where it is no longer I who make my lexicon, by definitional fiat, but rather it takes shape independently and doing this shapes my thought. It is an alienation of my freedom as well as the great source of illusion; and that is why the mean of this age combated this cosmos of meaningful order with such determination."[182] It should be noted that, on first glance, the designative view may seem more practically acceptable. Yet, we must take into account the holistic nature of language and how new terms come into common usage. Taylor notes that though "[m]en are constantly shaping language," their linguistic creativities are always situated; they are "never quite autonomous, quite uncontrolled by the rest of language. They can only be introduced and make sense because they already have a place within the web, which must at any moment be taken as given over by

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[181] Ibid., 226.
[182] Ibid., 226.

far the greater part of its extent."[183] Hence, with language – as with any creative possibility – the

human agent is creative within an inescapably given normativity. To live toward eschewing this

given normativity is to decay toward nothingness. As we noted earlier, Walker Percy was

moving toward a significant affirmation of community; most essential to this pursuit was his

interest in semiology.

Percy's Semiological Search for Meaning

Supplementing Percy's search for authentic community and his critique of alienation is

his exploration of language – particularly his proposed triadic theory of communication, which

involved sign theory and the nature of naming. In the modern age, Percy considered language

essentially the last remaining anthropological mystery: "Only language and other symbolic

behavior (art, music) seems to remain as the sole remaining indisputably unique attribute of man.

If language can be shown to be within the capability of apes, dolphins, and humpback whales,

the dethronement of man will be complete."[184] Percy's theory-laden emphasis on language –

largely following Charles Sanders Peirce's work – hinges on his triadic theory of language and

meaning. He comments that "[t]riadic behavior is that event in which sign A is understood by

organism B, not as a signal to flee or approach, but as 'meaning' or referring to another

perceived segment of the environment."[185] Not only is there something more to human

communication than mere mechanistic response – or, behaviorism – but Percy further comments

that "all such triadic behavior is social in origin. A signal received by an organism is like other

signals or stimuli from its environment. But a sign requires a sign-giver. Thus, every triad of

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[183] Ibid., 232.
[184] Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 169.
[185] Ibid., 95.

sign-reception requires another triad of sign-utterance. Whether the sign is a word, a painting, or a symphony . . . a sign transaction requires a sign-utterer and a sign-receiver."[186] While language signifies a unique, socially-embedded understanding and exchange of meaning, it also, on Percy's understanding, implicates the self's metaphysical homelessness.

The human self embodies a kind of freedom that is wholly unique in the world. Percy comments that "[a]s soon as the self becomes self-conscious – that is, aware of its own unique unformulability in its world of signs – from that moment forward, it cannot escape the predicament of its placement in the world."[187] Here, Percy describes the possibilities uniquely attendant to human agency; that is, the self – because it achieves consciousness, or, self-awareness – eludes behavioristic descriptors. Yet, the paradox is that the self still "must be *placed* in a world. It cannot *not* be placed. If it chooses by default not to be placed, then its placement is that of not choosing to be placed."[188] One essential element of Percy's sign theory and of the self's need to be placed in the world is the process involved in naming. We have been saying that the self's resistance of any sort of submission, or, self-giving, is actually a negation of the self because it requires content that is always given from the outside. Thus, it is telling that Percy considers naming an affirmation: "Naming or symbolization may be defined as the affirmation of the thing as being what it is under the auspices of the symbol. When the child understands that by the word 'ball' his father means the round thing, his understanding is of the nature of a yes-saying. . . . But an affirmation requires two persons, the namer and the hearer."[189] Language involves interpersonally agreed upon symbols that signify mutual affirmation of meaning. However, the self – the "namer and hearer" – seems to elude the category of *things*, yet

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[186] Ibid., 96.
[187] Ibid., 109.
[188] Ibid., 110.
[189] Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 133.

still feels the need to be placed, or authoritatively named.

Following Kierkegaard, Percy defines the human categories of affirmation in terms of authentic-inauthentic. He says, "[A]s soon as an individual becomes a name-giver or a hearer of a name, he no longer coincides with what he is biologically. Henceforth, he must exist either authentically or inauthentically. . . . A person may flourish biologically while, at the same time, living a desperately alienated and anonymous life."[190] Percy goes on to say that "whether I write or read a line of great poetry, form or understand a scientific hypothesis, I thereby exist authentically as a namer or a hearer, as an 'I' or a 'thou' – and in either case as a co-celebrant of what is."[191] Other people are necessary collaborators – "co-celebrants" – of existence, and, further, we require names to resist the void of anonymity. Of course, the problem for humanity is that the cosmos which he is situated in has been deemed largely disenchanted – and, thus, indifferent to man's place in its midst. Man's existence is inescapably derivative; however, who or what can authoritatively name him in terms of his ultimate place in the grand narrative? Essential to understanding Percy's reconciliation between word and world – and between self and other – is his commitment to the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation. However, before considering this commitment, we would do well to consider Percy's advocacy for a new science – novel writing – which he considered an equally appropriate – even authoritative – form of knowledge; further, we want to consider how a Bakhtinian literary analysis allows us to recognize the structures of alienation and community that are inherent in novelistic worlds.

Diagnosing Alienation: Percy, Bakhtin, and the Novel

Percy considered novel writing a science which was essential in its ability to provide

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[190] Ibid., 134-5.
[191] Ibid., 135.

diagnostic analysis of man's problems. For Percy, the novelist is, in a sense, a detached

empiricist-physician providing analysis of man's plight by describing it in narrative form. Taking

Anton Chekhov as his literary exemplar, Percy believed the twentieth century was ripe for

novelistic diagnosis because

> [t]o 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,
>
> whether novelist, poet, playwright, filmmaker, can perhaps be said to come that
>
> much closer to that of the 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.[192]

Percy's novels are literary attempts to expose the related problems of alienation, malaise, and

despair which he saw to be particularly prevalent in American culture. For Percy, as we have

seen, these novelistic diagnoses gain credence because of the nature of naming that is necessarily

attendant to literature. Because the novel's structure of action and character mimics the nature of

narrative and character that are necessary for understanding human agency, it is uniquely and

inherently set up to expose life's incongruities. And because narratives are necessarily

communal, novelistic structure also exposes alienation. Toward this end, Mikhail Bakhtin's

novelistic themes – particularly his affirmation of heteroglossia and critique of monologism –

can enrich our task.

O'Connor, Percy, and Updike all produced novels that could be deepened by Bakhtinian

analysis, because their novels evince competing socio-ideologies – including those differing

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[192] Ibid., 206.

between author and character. Michael Kobre and Robert H. Brinkmeyer have each provided

calculated criticism, in Bakhtinian categories, of Walker Percy's and Flannery O'Connor's

novels, respectively.[193] Bakhtin comments that at any given moment in the midst of

heteroglossia, "language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the

word . . . but also . . . into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups,

'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth."[194] These layers of

language work toward illustrating that "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the

borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It

becomes 'one's own' only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent,

when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention."[195]

And, continuing with Bakhtin's terms, the novel can be defined as "a diversity of social speech

types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."[196] In short, Bakhtinian

analysis allows the critic to consider a few compelling issues regarding language, alienation, and

sociality: the inward monologisms that characters keep free from interpersonal transparency; the

conversations that form and alter characters' ideological direction and identity formulation; and

the course these languages take in the novel also reveals, to some extent, authorial ideology. Of

course, the self is not merely an amalgamation of voices. As Kobre has effectively expressed, the

individual must selectively appropriate the linguistic socio-ideologies he receives in his

interactions,[197] but these conversations are essential for Percy as the "source and guarantor of our

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[193] See Michael Kobre's *Walker Percy's Voices* and Robert H. Brinkmeyer's *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*.
[194] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 271-2.
[195] Ibid., 293-4.
[196] Ibid., 262.
[197] Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 18.

identities."[198] When the self is transparent in interaction, the possibility opens up whereby "one's

inauthentic self is exposed or one's real self is validated 'in the discovering look of another.'"[199]

In the direct literary analysis we will examine in Part 2, Bakhtinian analysis will prove helpful to

not only elucidating onanistic, alienating violations of interpersonal intimacy within the

structures of language, but also to exposing individualistic remnants in the underlying authorial

voice which ultimately inhibit faithful, authentic depictions of community. But before

considering the prominent absence in these novels of what Hunter has recently termed "faithful

presence," it will be helpful to consider how Percy's understanding of the Incarnation, the

Eucharist, and its implications may expose a point of departure where he still remains

individualistic in his believing and aesthetic tendencies.

Percy's Incarnational and Eucharistic Basis for a Meaningful Narrative

As a Christian with specifically Catholic commitments, Percy placed a particularly *realist*

emphasis on the Incarnation and the Eucharist in an attempt to bridge the divide between

observable and spiritual realities. Toward the end of his life, he took it as his task not just to

restore Christianity to academic respectability, but to firmly establish it as a body of knowledge

that could be apprehended with absolute certainty. Here, again, it is necessary to turn to

Desmond, for no Percy critic has more concisely and adequately synthesized the totality of

Percy's interests on the basis of the Incarnation and the Eucharist:

> The Eucharist is the essential sign of mystical community made real in human
>
> history. Belief in the Incarnation and in the real presence of God-in-Christ in the
>
> Eucharist, with all its reticular implications, was the core belief that informed his

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[198] Ibid., 20.
[199] Ibid., 20.

theology, his philosophy, his theories of language and of fiction writing (the

community of art), and his own practice as a novelist. Belief in the divine Word

made flesh, for Percy, is the central truth of community. Percy's theological

vision of community was interwoven throughout his thought and writing with his

belief in philosophical realism. . . . [H]e felt it crucial to believe in a 'realistic'

philosophy and theology that could lead to absolute certainty, such as the

certainty that the Eucharist was not a symbol but a reality, and that God was

genuinely present as a person in the consecrated bread and wine.[200]

Percy's affirmation of the Incarnation is agreeable on a couple of levels. First, he commits

himself to a particular content that provides a meaningful narrative and articulation of character.

God affirms his creative order and human beings by entering time and space, taking on human

flesh, and living among the human race for the purposes of reconciliation between Himself and

human kind. However, what seems evident in these descriptions is that they are primarily

concerned with personal actions rather than things. The tendency among Catholic considerations

of the Eucharist is to identity the real presence of Christ and his signified actions as locally

present in the *things* of bread and wine. This articulation, which certainly has material – and

therefore modern-scientific – implications, seemingly provides the basis for Percy's concern with

absolute certainty. In the rest of this chapter, I want to expand, in a few ways, on John D. Sykes's

specific critique of Percy's grounds for community life, and its proponents like Desmond. Sykes

comments, "My point, in opposition to Desmond's presentation of Percy, is that the tension

between faith and reason was bound to be relaxed in favor of reason so long as Percy used Peirce

to establish 'no less than an anthropological basis for the creation of a revitalized organon of

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[200] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 5.

truth.' The goal itself was problematic."[201] Percy may have adequately pointed out the necessity

of faith, but his aspirations of making that necessity *rational in any demonstrable sense*, though

understandable, may have been a goal that proved problematic in its immodesty. Any attempt to

eliminate the distinctions between modern science and individual faith – or, in a different way,

objectivity and subjectivity – is bound to fail because self-conscious, self-evaluative actions

transcend the categories of modern-scientific objectivity. The "real presence" of historically-

remembered or presently-encountered personal actions – of embodied personal expressions –

always necessarily requires faith in a way that resists the scientistic sense of observable reality.

Following Sykes's critique of community life in Percy's and O'Connor's work, I want to spend

the rest of this chapter developing the point that signals Christ's "real presence" within the

immanent frame manifest in the faithful, communal actions of Christ's body – His people; and

the emphasis on Christ's action toward people generally, and through his people specifically, is,

perhaps, the proper emphasis for sacraments like the Eucharist, which will allow for fulfilling

transcendence[202] through interpersonal intimacy with God and man.

The Absence of Faithful Community Life

Though O'Connor, Percy, and Updike have offered glimpses of redemption in their

novels, their narratives often prove slightly dissatisfying in that they ultimately lack any

depictions of community life. Or, we might say that their narratives lack a communally minded

faithful presence[203] because their authors seemingly avoid inserting their own character into the

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[201] John D. Sykes, Jr., *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*
(Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2007), 110.
[202] In my usage of "transcendence" here, I refer simply to the possibility to "overcome."
[203] Here, I borrow Hunter's concept from *To Change the World* – a concept that I will unpack
below.

narratives. In his chapter "Southern Strangers and the Sacramental Community," Sykes voices a fine critique of the lack of depictions of community life in O'Connor's and Percy's work. He comments that O'Connor's work "is so firmly fixed on the drama of the individual soul that she offers no positive vision of life together to counter her scathing satire of consumer society,"[204] and that Percy's affection for the detached observer, and too strong a commitment to Kierkegaard indicates that his "understanding of the self, despite qualifications, remains atomistic."[205] Additionally, Sykes rightly asserts that "one looks in vain in the fiction of O'Connor and Percy for examples of a realized community" and that "[i]ntense scrutiny of the fact of alienation may show the need for communion, but it does not supply the lack."[206] One could provide different analyses as to why there is a lack of community life depicted by authors who, not only have professed Christian commitments, but felt they were providing significantly redemptive narratives. Certainly, one factor is that O'Connor, Percy, and Updike wanted to avoid "church fiction." Or, they wanted to avoid overly didactic, and, thus, ultimately unrealistic narratives. One could argue, however, that this concern reveals a significant indictment of the American church. Ralph Wood and Stanley Hauerwas have convincingly argued that American churches have made it nearly impossible for authors to offer convincing depictions of the institutional church because "the church has become virtually invisible in America. It has so fully identified itself with the American project that our artists have had little cause to heed any unique and distinctively Christian witness in the churches."[207] Hauerwas's and Wood's reading of the exclusion of the church from the American literary tradition certainly comports with the

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[204] Sykes, "Southern Strangers and the Sacramental Community," *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, 159.
[205] Ibid., 164.
[206] Ibid., 161.
[207] Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood, "How the Church Became Invisible: A Christian Reading of American Literary Tradition," *Religion and Literature* 38.1 (Spring 2006): 61.

analysis put forth in chapter two that American individualism was largely characteristic of the American church's community life. While the authors go on to commend O'Connor for her "sacramental fiction" because it is "not didactic,"[208] they also submit that "O'Connor remained unable to depict a faithful community wherein such drastic divine grace might be socially embodied and ethically sustained."[209] My contention is that the former praise of O'Connor's sacramental avoidance of didacticism is not unrelated to the latter criticism of her novels' lack of communal depictions. Though "preachy" novels are certainly something to be avoided, and O'Connor intimates that "the real heart of the story" lies in "action,"[210] I would argue that O'Connor's excessive revulsion to "didacticism" and mis-emphasis on the sacraments as being predominantly about the things of creation are excessive in a way that betrays an understanding of art as an intentioned action of the artist, and ultimately undermines any potential visions of redemption through interpersonal human agents as opposed to transfigured things.[211]

Flannery O'Connor's and Walker Percy's commitment to, and particular understanding of, "sacramental reality" ultimately sets them at odds with a view of art that is based on action, and narrows the redemptive possibilities of their work. Sykes comments that for Percy, like O'Connor, "[T]he sacraments take on a life-and-death importance. For ultimately, it is only through them that the basic spiritual needs of the self can be met. The sacraments restore us to the world by affirming the connection between the spiritual and physical. . . . [T]he sacraments reconcile us to God, satisfying our need for transcendence."[212] This view of the sacraments leads in two problematic directions whereby (1) the sacraments are a mystical form of self-

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[208] Ibid., 73.

[209] Ibid., 78.

[210] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 111.

[211] We will take up this point further in chapter 4 in an analysis of *Wise Blood*.

[212] Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, 170.

transcendence, and (2) God's restorative purposes are predominantly through the things of

Creation rather than the active beings of creation. Additionally, Hauerwas and Wood offer a

telling, extensive comment on the sacramental view of literature that O'Connor espoused: "Just

as baptism resembles nothing so much as drowning and eucharist appears as a kind of

cannibalism – while both events are the very means of life temporal and everlasting – so will

Christian fiction be characterized by a necessary alterity, since the central Christian premise is

that the *world* made and redeemed by God is constantly interrupted and *transfigured* by

revelation."[213] These particular commitments to a sacramental vision of the world cause both

O'Connor and Percy to be too detached from their work in such a way that they can only counter

individualistic tendencies by, in their own particular ways, depicting worlds which are

sacramentally infused with a kind of Christian otherness, and, thus, are ultimately uninhabitable

for Christ-less characters. Yet, it seems evident that this position forces the authors into a corner

wherein the Christian otherness of reality never becomes affirmingly familiar via the faithful

presence of interpersonal human agency.

  In his work *Art in Action*, Wolterstorff offers a compelling case that the modern's

philosophical understanding of art must be overhauled. His fundamental argument is that "works

of art are objects and instruments of action. They are all inextricably embedded in the fabric of

human intention. They are objects and instruments of action whereby we carry out our intentions

with respect to the world, our fellows, ourselves, and our gods."[214] Hence, faithful authorial

action need not necessarily be equated with didacticism. The epigraph to Wolterstorff's work

from J. R. Lucas's *Freedom and Grace* appears telling for our considerations here: "If we, as

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[213] Hauerwas and Wood, "How the Church Became Invisible: A Christian Reading of American Literary Tradition," 73. Emphasis added.

[214] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Art in Action* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 3.

theists, believe that the universe is fundamentally personal in character, it follows that our ultimate understanding will not be in terms of things, which occupy space and may or may not possess certain properties, but of persons, who characteristically *do* things. Action, not substance, will be our most important category of thought. It is a truth too long neglected by philosophers."[215] That is, though we might say that God gives the individual grace via things such as food, it would be a mistake to avoid His exceeding manifestation of Himself via the meal graciously cultivated by one person for another or a host of others. That things are created by God is not primarily an affirmation of things as mere ends in themselves, but, rather, as instruments for personally purposive ends, which make those things enjoyable ends. However, Hauerwas and Wood are right to assert that imaginative depictions of community life are made difficult in an American context in which the church community has largely receded from fruitful action. So, to conclude, I want to briefly unpack Hunter's concept of "faithful presence" – to which I have been alluding – and assert that this socially-embedded, active faith might offer a paradigm-shift for more fulfilling narratives, and, thus, more fulfilling identities.

If the self is primarily rooted in community and situated in narrative, then the possibility of transcendence – or, the possibility to overcome life's pressures – is necessarily rooted in an active, inter-personal community which is characterized by reconciliation. Berger has used the phrase "signals of transcendence" to describe particular instances in the immanent frame which seem to indicate the possibility to overcome the difficulties attendant to being a human agent in the world; and he asserts, for instance, that one of these signals of transcendence is laughter.[216] Signals of transcendence, like laughter, momentarily create an alternate reality where the

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[215] Ibid., i.
[216] Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: W DE G, 1997) 205.

violences and burdens of the immanent frame seem powerless. Berger asserts that the contention

for believers is that the redeeming signals within these moments "are not temporary at all, but

rather . . . point to that other world that has always been the object of religious attitude."[217] My

contention is that these "signals of transcendence" are primarily, if not always, socially

embedded. Laughter, to continue with Berger's example, is almost always shared with others; of

course, we can conceive of an individual laughing to himself, but his laughter is the result of a

conscious reflection that was socially formed. Berger's accomplished disciple, James Davison

Hunter, with his concept of "faithful presence," has asserted a compelling communal narrative

wherein these signals of transcendence make a totally redeemed reality on the other side of death

significantly more plausible.

Hunter's notion of faithful presence calls for human agents to be communally minded,

character-driven, and actively seeking the well-being of others. It is particular in its moral

judgments in such a way that justice is not undermined, but also avoids coercive rhetoric or

action that would undermine its reconciliatory character. Hunter comments that the particular

vision of this community of faithfully-present individuals "is the vision of shalom. It is a vision

of order and harmony, fruitfulness, and abundance, wholeness, beauty, joy, and well-being. For

the Christian, this was God's intention in creation and it is his promise for the new heaven and

the new earth."[218] Hunter, like O'Connor and Percy, grounds his vision in the Incarnation, but

with a compellingly different emphasis: "In the most momentous event in history, God became

incarnate in Christ not only to model shalom (by forgiving the sinner, feeding the hungry,

healing the sick and infirm, raising the dead, losing the outsider, and caring for all in need) but,

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[217] Ibid., 205.
[218] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford U P, 2010), 228.

as St. Paul writes, to be 'our shalom.'"[219] That is, not only was God, incarnated in Christ, a model of shalom in his particular interactions while on earth, but His life signified reconciliatory actions toward all of humanity. For the Christian, God not only dwelt among men – submitting himself to take on flesh – but fearlessly submitted himself to the vile hatred of the cross to reconcile the human race to Himself. Yet, what is crucial for us within this particular narrative, in terms of freedom, is that Christ submitted himself to the cross as a sacrifice for others, knowing he would rise again. That is, if one believes that the momentary signals of transcendence in this life point to a reality after death which will be eternally and fully constituted by the character of these transcendent moments, then surely this believer has grounds for a truly radical freedom that undermines neither his identity nor the relationships which constitute him. On these terms, the human agent neither retreats from this life as if it were devoid of goodness, nor excessively embraces it as if this life were all that he had to lose. Operating on this paradigm shift of freedom, Hunter says, "*Christians are to live toward the well-being of others, not just to those within the community of faith, but to all.*"[220] Of course, this vision of shalom, rooted in the particularity of the Incarnation and the ultimate triumph of resurrection, necessarily entails meaningful commitments that are rooted in faith.

According to Hunter's vision, we have reconciliation between word and world and between self and other on the basis of faith rather than certainty; however, this reconciliation is particularly rooted in faith in such a way that the immanent commitments it entails are certainly good for all. This "communal narrative"[221] entails making familiar to all people the language and grammar of its story: "Words such as covenant, grace, gift, sin, mercy, forgiveness, love, hope,

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[219] Ibid., 229.
[220] Ibid., 229-30.
[221] Ibid., 237.

blessing, the flesh, glory, creation, resurrection, sacrament, and the like must be learned anew in part by understanding the significance of the language and narrative of faith within the context of the social, political, and cultural realities of one's time."[222] This narrative is imbued with faith – not abstractedly – but particularly in two ways. The first has yet to be pointed out explicitly, but serves, and requires, the second in a way that bears reiterating: (1) Significant community life is necessary for human agents, but these interactions are necessarily rooted in faith – faith that the other also seeks my well-being, and faith that what the other says has established, shared meaning between us. And (2), understanding that other human agents will not always act faithfully, we place faith in an authoritative, personal Creator who has promised that this life is not all there is, but that the goodness, truth, and beauty that we can see through a glass darkly, will be inaugurated after death for all of eternity. And, thus, faith in God supports the fulfillment of faith in others, while also helping us cope with the destruction faith in others can entail.

The Christian commitments of the primary thinkers we have been concerned with – O'Connor, Percy, Updike, Kierkegaard, et. al. – have necessarily driven us to reconsider modernity's commitments to autonomous reason and/or desire. While some secularists may balk at the religious bent of this study – or the importance of faith in human agency – they would do well to thoughtfully consider sociologists like Peter L. Berger, who asserts that modern society has "threatened the plausibility of religious theodicies, but it has not removed the experiences that call for them. Human beings continue to be stricken by sickness and death; they continue to experience social injustice and deprivation. The various secular creeds and ideologies that have arisen in the modern era have been singularly unsuccessful in providing satisfactory

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[222] Ibid., 237.

theodicies."[223] Further, modernity "has not fundamentally changed the finitude, fragility, and mortality of the human condition. What it has accomplished is to seriously weaken those definitions of reality that previously made that human condition easier to bear."[224] Fundamental to autonomous notions of freedom and human agency is the individualistic inwardness of desire and reason, but this inwardness is coupled with the failure to recognize that desires and reason are socially shaped. The human agent appropriates, but he does so within the context of a host of physical, social, and metaphysical contingencies, and these contingencies necessitate the faith that among these givens, truth can be grasped.

Conclusion

The self seems constituted by its need for community, and its need to be situated within a narrative understanding of this life. And this communal narrative necessarily calls for moral commitments, and, thus, discriminations. It calls for faithful action with one another, ever seeking reconciliation, while also understanding that not every human agent will act toward this end. Thus, it also calls for faithful articulation of that which should be excluded from our communities for one another's well being. As we turn to part two and its literary analysis of O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Percy's *The Moviegoer*, and Updike's *Rabbit, Run*, we are in a good position to consider these three novels with the understanding that these authors' narratives offer worthy Kierkegaardian critique of autonomous freedom, but ultimately lack socially-embedded possibilities for redemption. That is, continuing with our metaphor for the faulty understanding of human agency, O'Connor, Percy, and Updike offer compellingly critical depictions of

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[223] Peter L. Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 185.
[224] Ibid., 185.

onanistic tendencies, but without depicting significantly fruitful *intercourse*.

Part 2, Chapter 4

The Ascetic Bondage of Manipulating the Essential Self: Hazel Motes as Autonomous Modern

and Revelation as Violence in *Wise Blood*

Introduction

Perhaps the most contentious debate in the relatively brief history of Flannery O'Connor

criticism has been – and, no doubt, will continue to be – over the intermingling of violence with

revelation in her fiction. I want to offer that it might be helpful to return to her first major work

and novel – *Wise Blood*. Critics have often noted that O'Connor's first novel is somewhat

anomalous when compared to her later work. In consideration of O'Connor's affinities with

Søren Kierkegaard,[225] I will argue that *Wise Blood* provides a foundational precedent for how

O'Connor's later intentionally distorted depictions of revelation are motivated by a

fundamentally orthodox view of the limits of man's freedom and knowledge. That is, *Wise Blood*

reminds us that for the autonomous modern, revelation will often be perceived as an intrusion

from "the other" – a form of violence against one's modern, egoistic sensibilities; further,

because O'Connor's sacramental approach to revelation often involved strange transfigurations

that de-familiarized God as other, her protagonists' redemptive moments ultimately prove

individualistic and devoid of intimacy.[226]

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[225] Here, I hope "affinity" functions as a signal of modesty in incorporating Kierkegaard as a point of furthering *Wise Blood* criticism. Of course, O'Connor more directly incorporated countless other influences – particularly Catholic ones. But the combination of O'Connor's comedic satire of existentialists like Jean-Paul Sartre and her Christian commitments seems to align her with Kierkegaard in a way that deserves further exploration.

[226] This chapter will explore particular themes that have been visited by various other O'Connor scholars, but, to my knowledge, not in such a way that seeks to reconcile four particularly prevalent themes in a pointed fashion: autonomy, revelation, violence, and the lack of community life in her works. Ralph Wood and Farrell O'Gorman have most extensively

Kierkegaardian Themes and the Precedent for Violence in *Wise Blood*

If *Wise Blood* sets a thematic precedent for the intermingling of violence with revelation

in O'Connor's later work, then it is helpful to first elucidate how two relative anomalies, which

are unique to O'Connor's first novel, specifically provide the contours for such a precedent to be

perceived. Here, I want to follow two helpful points that Frederick Asals makes in his oft-

referenced work *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*. He notes the existential

thought which was prevalent during the mid-twentieth century and influential for *Wise Blood*:

"Existentialism was both in the air and in print. From late in World War II on into the 1950s the

influential literary journals . . . to which Flannery O'Connor herself would be contributing by the

late 1940s and early 1950s – poured forth a stream of translations, interpretations, and reviews

which delivered to their audience word of this newest mode of thought."[227] Further, Asals

comments that Kierkegaard may have been most distinctly influential during the period, and that

Kierkegaardian catch phrases would be familiar to readers of *Wise Blood*.[228] Hence, tracing

affinities between O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Kierkegaardian thought seems an apt endeavor –

particularly considering that in addition to the existential language which populates *Wise Blood*,

they both maintained orthodox Christian commitments. The second point of uniqueness for *Wise*

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confirmed, in various places, the emphasis on modern autonomy in *Wise Blood*. Sarah Gordon and John D. Sykes have pointed out the lack of positive affirmations of community or charity in O'Connor's depictions of redemption. And, *most notably*, Frederick Asals and John Desmond have offered compelling considerations regarding the use of violence in O'Connor's fiction. The aim of this chapter is to offer that, upon considering O'Connor's affinities with Kierkegaard, an existential dialectic of freedom and alienation helps to bind these themes into a modestly cohesive explanation that helpfully furthers the continuing debate among O'Connor critics, while also offering some charitable reconciliation.

[227] Frederick Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity* (Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1982), 29. Further, in a letter to "A.," O'Connor makes one of her only mentions of Kierkegaard when she asks if "A." has "read *Fear and Trembling*" and alludes to having read an article on Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 273.

[228] Asals, *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, 29-30.

Blood that Asals points out is that "in *Wise Blood* Hazel Motes's *moment of recognition* comes from staring at the sky,"[229] and, unlike much of her later works, "matter [remains] impenetrable and no revelation [comes]. To the protagonists of [O'Connor's] later work, however, the terrifying awakenings to the dimension embodied in [the landscape] prove ultimately irresistible."[230] That is, revelation in *Wise Blood*, unlike much of O'Connor's later work, is not manifested in a violent, exterior intrusion upon the protagonist from the outside created order.[231] Essentially, the two points from Asals's criticism regarding *Wise Blood* that I want to consider in relation to one another is the novel's affinity with Kierkegaardian thought, and its employment of more traditional forms of revelation. That is, because O'Connor – like Kierkegaard – recognizes the essential necessity for revelation, she also recognizes, like Kierkegaard, how averse the autonomous modern is to accepting revelation. And *Wise Blood*, unlike much of O'Connor's later work, seems to most clearly present the autonomous modern's perception of and reaction to a more conventional revelation, and, thus, provides a helpful precedent for O'Connor's later more literal distortions. These two points featured in *Wise Blood* – O'Connor's Kierkegaardian view of revelation and autonomy, and the relative absence of violent forms of revelation – I take as helpful in the continuing scholarly debate over whether O'Connor's artistic distortions of revelation are motivated by considerations of orthodoxy.

Regarding connections between O'Connor and Kierkegaard, there is one particular critical precedent which I take as foundational for my comparisons. In his 1972 offering *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor*, David Eggenschwiler argues that O'Connor was a

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[229] Ibid., 60.

[230] Ibid., 69.

[231] Here, I would also note that by referring to intrusive "violence" in her later work, I do not mean merely physical violence, but also forms of emotional violence. Hence, something like a strange, timely stroke in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" would fit the assertion.

humanist because she was concerned with what it meant to be authentically human. In one

relevant comment, Eggenschwiler says, "[I]t would be a basic distortion not to realize that in her

work to be estranged from God is necessarily to be estranged from one's essential self, which

involves a form of psychological imbalance[.]"[232] Eggenschwiler goes on to say that O'Connor's

concern with "the whole horse" – or, with the wholeness of existence – as a Christian is

tantamount to Kierkegaard's concern with construing the nature of human agency as a synthesis

of necessity and possibility.[233] Finally, Eggenschwiler anticipates my argument when he says,

> "[Kierkegaard] claims that within man's dialectical self . . . possibility is limited
>
> by necessity[.] If man has an essential self, he cannot live freely in opposition to
>
> it; if he could, 'freedom' would mean only freedom of choice, unlimited
>
> possibility. . . . [O'Connor] forms her characters convincingly out of an awareness
>
> of man's dialectical nature and out of the belief that the truly free act does not
>
> violate man's essential self[.][234]

Thus, we might say that O'Connor's *Wise Blood* is "existential" because O'Connor is primarily

concerned with *authenticity*. Following Eggenschwiler's argument, I want to offer a fuller

reading of Kierkegaard's work concerning free human agency in relation to *Wise Blood*, and

consider how the dialectic of freedom and alienation is essential to understanding both

O'Connor's art, and the common dissatisfaction with her depictions of redemption.

The most compelling affinity between O'Connor and Kierkegaard is their view that

human agency – contrary to the culturally-codified modern belief – is not autonomous, but,

rather, is fundamentally constituted by a kind of *givenness* which necessitates revelation for

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[232] David Eggenschwiler, *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor* (Detroit: Wayne State U P, 1972), 13.
[233] Ibid., 25.
[234] Ibid., 93.

authentic freedom. Here it is helpful to recapitulate some of the conclusions in chapter one

regarding Kierkegaard, free human agency, and revelation. Since the influential thought of Jean-

Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, autonomous notions of freedom have devolved in the

modern age from freedom as constituted by one's self-determined moral/rational agency to

freedom as constituted by one's ability to act according to unfettered desire – desires fed in

America by a consumerist culture of choice. It is helpful to recall from chapter one

Kierkegaard's journal entry regarding Kantian autonomy:

> Kant was of the opinion that man is his own law (autonomy) – that is, he binds
>
> himself under the law which he himself gives himself. Actually, in a profounder
>
> sense, this is how lawlessness or experimentation are established. . . . If I am
>
> bound by nothing higher than myself and I am to bind myself, where would I get
>
> the rigorousness as A, the binder, which I do not have as B, who is supposed to be
>
> bound, when A and B are the same self.[235]

Kierkegaard's critique of Kant is clear and even prophetic: if the human agent is expected to

produce morality via his own rational capabilities, then moral social norms are sure to degenerate

into relativistic lawlessness, for there is no sure foundation for value. As Kosch puts it, for

Kantians, "the idea of freely chosen immorality is unintelligible."[236] To act immorally on this

model is to act irrationally, and the enthroning of education in modern America seems to speak

to the primacy of this idea. Instead of freedom being constituted by radically self-determining

agency, Kierkegaard understood the human agent to be a synthetic relation – a synthetic relation

which is itself an *established* relation. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard – via the

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[235] *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers Volume 1*, trans. and ed. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana U P, 1967), Entry 188, pp. 76.
[236] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford U P, 2006), 2.

pseudonym Anti-Climacus – asserts that man is "a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom, and necessity" and that this synthetic self "must either have established itself or have been established by another."[237] Essentially, Kierkegaard is saying that *the human agent is not self-posited, but is a derived relation* from a transcendent Creator God. Further, if man is fundamentally constituted by both freedom and necessity, then it follows that a necessary aspect of realizing freedom is to understand what being a human agent necessarily requires – or, to understand and submit to the *facticity* of one's existence. As Michelle Kosch puts it, "Despair in the most general sense will turn out to be the unwillingness to accept human agency with all of its particular conditions."[238] Despair, according to Kierkegaard, predominantly results not from exterior hindrances to one's free human agency, but from one's misunderstanding of the nature of human agency. Thus, Kierkegaard understood that to live freely necessarily entails understanding what it means to be human, and this fundamentally requires revelation from the Creator from whom the creature derives.

Though O'Connor may not have used the term "autonomy" or provided such a philosophical or anthropological elucidation of man's need to be informed, she certainly has similar concerns in mind in her authorship of *Wise Blood*. Perhaps the most evident support of O'Connor's unwitting alignment with a Kierkegaardian elucidation of free human agency is found in her introduction to the second edition of *Wise Blood* in 1962 where she says, "Does one's integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do? I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived simply.

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[237]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1980), 13-4.

[238] Michelle Kosch, *Freedom and Reason in Kant, Schelling, and Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford U P, 2006), 154. As cited in chapter one, Kosch's work offers a detailed consideration of *The Sickness unto Death* and the nature of human agency.

It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen."[239] In our consideration of O'Connor's affinities with Kierkegaard, it is compelling that the introduction to *Wise Blood's* second edition includes an extensive remark on freedom, and that this remark alludes to one's not being able to do something as being integrally human. Of course, we have no doubt, based on her Christian commitments, that O'Connor would agree with Kierkegaard that man's freedom is qualified by his need to submit to who God created him to be. Indeed, elsewhere, O'Connor comments that "[t]he Catholic novelist believes that you destroy your freedom by sin; the modern reader believes, I think, that you gain it in that way."[240] Yet, O'Connor's introduction to the second edition of her first novel is helpful toward pointing out that the subject of freedom was on her mind when writing *Wise Blood*. Essential to the first novel's narrative, and, indeed, O'Connor's later work, is her understanding that modern man's alleged freedom from the God who is revealed in the historical Christ of the Gospels is the utmost form of slavery. Kierkegaard would term the condition of freely choosing unfreedom as *despair*. And it seems O'Connor would agree: "At its best our age is an age of searchers and discoverers, and at its worst, an age that has domesticated despair and learned to live with it happily."[241]

Part of what I endeavored to point out in Part One, via recent work in philosophy, is that the existential corollary to autonomous notions of freedom is alienation, and the theme of alienation seems even more obvious than freedom in *Wise Blood*. To transpose the *telos* of one's existence from outside oneself to within oneself – or, to avoid acknowledging one's reliance on exterior agentic sources for the development of one's identity – is to obviate significant,

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[239] Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), 115.
[240] Ibid., 116.
[241] Ibid., 159.

committed relationships to other people. To renounce the *givenness* of one's existence and

identity is to preclude the givers – be they God or fellow men. The most telling existential term

in this regard in *Wise Blood* is the idea of home, functioning both as an earthly, familial place of

familiarity and as a metaphysical term signifying the nature of one's place in the cosmos.[242]

After returning home from war, Haze discovers that his family is absent. Further, on the initial

train ride that opens the novel, Mrs. Hitchcock incessantly asks Haze, "Are you going home?"

To which Haze snaps "No, I ain't." He goes on to say that he is going to Taulkinham and that he

"[d]on't know nobody there."[243] Later, the narrator describes a time at war camp when Haze

made some friends who "were not actually friends but he had to live with them."[244] When Haze's

non-friends inform him of the notion that he has no soul, the narrator tells us that Haze "had all

the time he could want to study his soul in and assure himself that it was not there. When he was

thoroughly convinced, he saw that this was something that he had always known. The misery he

had was *a longing for home*; *it had nothing to do with Jesus*."[245] When Haze returns from his

time of service, he discovers that his longing for home will not be satisfied in any literal sense.

His childhood house is empty, deserted, and rotting. Of course, a sense of home does not just

mean one's literal house or even simply one's literal family, but it also entails one's

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[242] Farrell O'Gorman rightly notes that the theme of "home" (and *homelessness*) in both *Wise Blood* and *The Moviegoer* are distinct qualities of postwar, apocalyptic fiction: "O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Percy's *The Moviegoer*, radically different as they are in tone and character, are definitively postwar southern fictions both in their protagonists (Hazel Motes is a veteran of World War II, Binx Bolling of the Korean War) and in their profound engagement with a new American culture that was beginning to dominate the South. Each critique of that culture – its rabid consumerism as communicated through pervasive advertising and embodied most fully in the automobile, its complacency under the sway of Hollywood and soothing media messengers of the public good – is presented in a setting characterized by an underlying apocalyptic mood." O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 2004), 166.
[243] Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 7.
[244] Ibid., 17.
[245] Ibid., 18.

understanding of his place in the cosmos, or his situation in the narrative of his life.[246] Indeed,

man's orientation in this life is most fundamentally constituted by what, or whom, he is

committed to. To be a creature of God, a Christ-like one, a husband, a father, a son, a teacher, or

a novelist is part of what it means to have a place in the cosmos – or, to feel at home. Perhaps

most telling regarding the importance of this theme is the original plan O'Connor had for *Wise*

Blood. Sarah Gordon notes this plan: "The principle . . . character, an illiterate Tennessean, has

lost his home through the breakdown of a country community. Home, in this instance, stands not

only for the place and family, but also for some absolute belief which would give him sanctuary

in the modern world."[247] Thus, it is compelling to note that Haze does not just reject Jesus and

lack significant relationships, but alongside these self-imposed alienations, he ironically

understands his misery as a longing for home. The irony is profoundly Kierkegaardian in its

dialectic: in his freedom, Haze chooses unfreedom.

     In addition to the existential themes in the novel, the other anomalous aspect of *Wise*

Blood among O'Connor's works is that, ultimately, its revelations are not excessively distorted,

violent, or embellished, but, instead, are more literal and traditional. Indeed, one could argue that

Hazel Motes's most significant revelation comes very traditionally from his fundamentalist,

traveling preacher of a grandfather. Haze recalls from his childhood a memory of his grandfather

pointing at him in front of a crowd of people saying, "[E]ven for that boy there, for that mean

sinful unthinking boy standing there with his dirty hands clenching and unclenching at his sides,

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[246] O'Gorman seems to echo Peter Berger's *The Homeless Mind* when he says, "Hazel Motes has no home, and in this way he seems to personify the final culmination of 'the modern consciousness, that thing Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary and guilty' and that O'Connor saw as characterizing 'the contemporary situation' in the Western world." O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads*, 166-7.

[247] Sarah Gordon, *The Obedient Imagination* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000), 98-9.

Jesus would die ten million deaths before He would let him lose his soul[.]"[248] While some

critics have dismissed the idea of O'Connor's aligning herself with her fundamentalist street

preachers due to the harshness of their tone, Ralph Wood and other critics have rightly noted

O'Connor's sympathetic admiration for the fundamentalist, backwoods Protestants due to their

commitment to the authority of the Scriptures and the reality of Christ's deity.[249] Hence, for

O'Connor, though the voice of the fundamentalist street preacher is harsh and manipulative, the

message preached is an authentic communication of revealed truth. And this authoritative,

revelatory voice is precisely what Haze ultimately seems to recoil against throughout the rest of

the novel – or, as Wood terms it, Haze is "properly scandalized"[250] by the early revelation. It is

because of this early revelation that, in *Wise Blood*, it is Haze – not the South – which is Christ-

haunted. That the revelatory message is a haunting violence to Haze throughout the novel is

directly tied to his stance as a free-from-God modern.

Hazel Motes as Autonomous Modern

That Haze is a literary exemplar of the autonomous modern seems apparent in a few

striking ways. First, the narrator clues us in to the idea that Haze represents the autonomous

modern when he notes that "[h]e had a strong confidence in his power to resist evil, it was

something he had inherited, like his face, from his grandfather."[251] Here, we are reminded of the

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[248] Ibid., 16.

[249] As Ralph Wood notes, though O'Connor's fundamentalist preachers often preach the "awful truth," it is the truth nonetheless. Ralph Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 166-7. See also Wood, "Flannery O'Connor's Strange Alliance with Southern Fundamentalists," *Flannery O'Connor and the Christian Mystery* Ed. John J. Murphy, et. al. (Provo, UT: Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature, Brigham Young University, 1997), 75-98.

[250] Ibid., 167.

[251] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 17.

self-governing moral agent who is free in the Kantian sense – man is *naturally* moral. Haze's

arrival to Taulkinham finds him boisterously preaching about the Church of Truth Without

Christ. His church is one that does not believe in the existence of God, sin, or the Incarnation. It

is a church constituted by Haze alone as "member and preacher" where "the blind don't see and

the lame don't walk and what's dead stays that way."[252] Haze himself is the autonomous arbiter

of what is true, and his sense of truth is based is based on his autonomous rationality. However,

not only is Haze's message radically autonomous and modern, so, too, is his pulpit.

The pulpit which O'Connor gives Haze is perhaps the most significant American cultural

artifact symbolizing autonomous notions of freedom: the automobile. Regarding Haze's Essex as

a symbol, O'Connor says, "[T]he hero's rat-colored automobile is his pulpit and his coffin as

well as something he thinks of as a means of escape. He is mistaken in thinking that it is a means

of escape, of course, and does not really escape his predicament until the car is destroyed by the

patrolman."[253] O'Connor notes that the automobile functions, falsely, as a means of escape – or,

we might say, as a means toward the end of *freedom*. In short, the automobile is man's transient

dream-machine, enabling him to transcend the supposed constraints of time, place, and people,

and, thus, allowing him more self-reliance. Wood directly connects our explorations in chapters

one and two above: "[the automobile] fulfills our fantasies of individualist autonomy, enabling

us to strike out for the proverbial territories whenever the limits of social existence press in upon

us. As Motes's only sacred space, the car serves as both pulpit and residence, enabling him to

incarnate his message in a life of perpetual isolation and vagabondage."[254] That the automobile

represents radical self-reliance for Haze is nowhere more evident than when he famously says,

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[252] Ibid., 101.
[253] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 71-2.
[254] Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*, 169.

"Nobody with a good car needs to be justified."[255] With his Essex, apparently, Haze is in control of both his existence and the ethical worth of his actions. Of course, toward the end of the novel, Haze's "moment of recognition staring at the sky" is prompted by the patrolman destroying his Essex; it is the closest O'Connor comes in *Wise Blood* to a violently distorted revelation.

To further point out O'Connor's affinities to Kierkegaardian themes, Haze's actions seem to embody the esthetic lifestyle described in Kierkegaard's *Either/or*. The basest manifestation of Kierkegaard's esthete is the human agent whose freedom is constituted by his living according to unfettered personal whim, and this unchecked obedience to desire most often manifests itself in sexual promiscuity. Haze initially alludes to his devotion to unrestrained freedom when he says to Mrs. Hitchcock on the train, "I'm going to do some things I never have done before."[256] The precise nature of these previously restricted "things" becomes apparent when Haze discovers the phone number of a prostitute in a bathroom stall. Soon, Haze is living the free life of unrestrained sexual desire – but on O'Connor's humorous terms. For Haze's sexual liaison is with Leora Watts – who is described, among other things, as a big woman with greasy skin. At one point, Haze, in a statement similar to the one mentioned earlier regarding his automobile, says, "I don't need Jesus . . . What do I need with Jesus? I got Leora Watts."[257] Haze's self-church message, the symbolism of his automobile-pulpit, and his lusty pursuit of a prostitute all support the notion that Haze is the unrestrained, autonomous modern – albeit a grotesquely debased one – who has freed himself from the perceived constraint of Christ.

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[255] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 109.
[256] Ibid., 7.
[257] Ibid., 52.

Hazel Motes's Perception of Revelation as Violence against his Modern Sensibilities

        Having established autonomous notions of freedom as a critical theme in *Wise Blood*, an

essential point that I want to make as it relates to O'Connor's later distortive use of violence is

that Haze, as this autonomous modern, perceives literal instances of revelation and grace as acts

of violence against his self-reliant ego. Almost immediately after we read of the revelation Haze

received from his traveling-preacher grandfather, we discover that Haze

> saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure
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> motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of
>
> his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then
>
> suddenly know it and drown. Where he wanted to stay was in Eastrod with his
>
> two eyes open, and his hands always handling the familiar thing, his feet on the
>
> known track[.][258]

Here, Haze's reaction to Christ's revelatory summons is to associate it with images of wildness

and drowning, and this is juxtaposed with his desire for the *sensible* and the *familiar*. Positively

gracious moments are hard to come by in O'Connor's fiction and, if written in, they are often

difficult to detect. Intriguingly enough, Haze's gracious moment is associated with his

automobile. When he is having persistent car troubles, Haze receives help from a man who gives

him a tank of gas and helps him to get back on the road. As Haze is gloating that his "car'll get

[him] anywhere,"[259] he asks the man what he owes him – to which the man responds that he

owes him nothing. Haze's recoiled response to the man's gracious act is telling when he spews,

"I don't need no favors from him."[260] The agentic extension of grace is clearly an offense – a

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[258] Ibid., 16.
[259] Ibid., 124.
[260] Ibid., 124.

perceived violent threat to Haze's self-reliance.

The radical autonomy which characterizes Haze's existence necessarily calls for him to perceive revelation and grace as forms of violence against his freedom and sense of self. Further, this precedent in *Wise Blood* offers more literal examples of O'Connor's later violent distortions of revelation. That O'Connor once commented that she used distortion as a literary tool to shock her readers out of stagnancy has often been noted. Yet, in the same lecture at Sweet Briar College in 1963, O'Connor also tellingly commented that God "has *revealed* himself specifically. [He] became man and rose from the dead. [He] *confounds the senses and sensibilities, [He is] known early on as a stumbling block.*"[261] O'Connor conceives of God's self-revelation in Christ as that which disorients modern sensibilities, and, in her fiction, we might say that the "stumbling block" is one which literally trips her autonomous, alienated protagonists.

A Reinforcement of Theme: Enoch Emery's Recognition of Alienation

The relationship between the Incarnation and the essential self in *Wise Blood* also seems evident in a way that does not involve Haze. That the existential dialectic of freedom and alienation is the primary theme in *Wise Blood* also seems evident in O'Connor's depiction of the comedic, though sad, story of Enoch Emery. Reconciling the presence of, and events surrounding, Enoch has long been a confounding point for O'Connor critics and readers, with some contending that it merely signals O'Connor's immaturity as a novelist at the time. O'Connor had little to say about Enoch in some remarks at Hollins College to introduce a

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[261] Ibid., 161. Emphasis added.

reading of her story: "As for Enoch, he is a moron and chiefly a comic character."[262] O'Connor's

derision is humorous, but less notable than her deeming him a "comic character." It seems

evident that Haze and Enoch mirror one another in a way that is chiefly important to this

argument: they are both alienated in Taulkinham. Yet, whereas Haze's response to his alienation

is ultimately ascetic, guilt-ridden despair, Enoch's response is to seek reconciliatory community,

albeit failingly.

Unlike Haze, Enoch feels the brunt of his alienation as redeemable. In one of Haze's and

Enoch's first conversations in Taulkinham, Enoch, referring to some indifferent people, reveals

to Haze, "You see . . . all they want to do is knock you down. I ain't never been to such a

unfriendly place before."[263] Endlessly curious over Haze and alienation, Enoch asks him, "you

know many people here?" After Haze responds no, Enoch says, "You ain't gonna know none

neither. This is one more hard place to make friends in. I been here two months and I don't know

nobody. Look like all they want to do is knock you down."[264] Eventually, Enoch comes to

recognize that Haze is just like everyone else in Taulkinham: "People ain't friendly here. You

ain't from here but you ain't friendly neither."[265] Indeed, Enoch's accusation against Haze

reveals both the differentiation in attitude between the two characters and Enoch's recognition of

the alienating nature of Taulkinham. While much has been written regarding the significance of

the gorilla suit in *Wise Blood*, it seems evident that its significance is connected to the

Incarnation; in the animalistic world of Taulkinham which O'Connor has created, if the

Incarnation is not a reality, then men are ultimately animalistic, and the desire for sociality is

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[262] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 116.
[263] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 43.
[264] Ibid., 44.
[265] Ibid., 54.

foundationally irredeemable.[266]

Haze's Inversion of Incarnation and the Evident Effects for Enoch

One message Haze preaches is that the Incarnation is not only a fiction, but that a new

jesus is necessary. At one point, Haze insists, "I believe in a new kind of jesus . . . one that can't

waste his blood redeeming people with it, because he's all man and ain't got any God in him. My

church is the Church Without Christ!"[267] Haze's message is not simply atheistic, but it is also

directly hostile to the idea that God was *embodied in Christ* – and, by implication, that humans

were not only created by God, but can also be reconciled to Him and one another. Hence, it is

telling that the *gift* Haze receives from Enoch is the grotesque embodiment of the inverted

Incarnation Haze preaches. The "new kind of jesus" is a small mummified corpse. This comedic

"gift" of a dead jesus is symbolic of the lack of redeemable sociality and giftedness between men

without Christ; if Jesus Christ was not God, then he remains dead, and alienated men are reduced

to mere animals.[268] That this seems to be the implicit message is evident in the end of Enoch's

story. He gets excited to meet the man in the gorilla suit who is greeting a line of kids:

> The child in front of him finished and stepped aside and left him facing the ape,

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[266] Notably, William Rodney Allen has referred to *Wise Blood's* setting as zoo-like. See: Allen, "The Cage of Matter: the World as Zoo in Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*," *American Literature* 58.2 (May 1986): 256-70. And Sarah Gordon describes the setting as essentially an embodiment of T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land*. See: Gordon, *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination*, 102-3.

[267] Ibid., 119.

[268] In her brilliant book, *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor*, Christina Bieber Lake seems to allude to similar implications regarding the corpse, Incarnation, and sociality: "The disintegration of the corpse also reflects the disintegration of the social order Sabbath and Haze have willfully perpetuated. . . . O'Connor assumes that her readers will react not like Sabbath, who literally embraces death. She hopes we will react like Haze, who retains enough of what his mother gave him to recognize this perversion for what it is, especially now that he has an undeniable incarnation of it right in front of his eyes." Lake, *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor* (Macon, GA: Mercy U P, 2005), 85.

who took his hand with an automatic motion. It was the first hand that had been

extended to Enoch since he had come to the city. It was warm and soft. For a

second he only stood there, clasping it. . . . The star leaned slightly forward and a

change came in his eyes: an ugly pair of human ones moved closer and squinted

at Enoch from behind the celluloid pair. 'You go to hell,' a surly voice inside the

ape-suit said, low but distinctly, and the hand jerked away. Enoch's humiliation

was so sharp and painful that he turned around three times before he realized

which direction he wanted to go in.[269]

Enoch's desire for the simple intimacy of recognition is denied, ironically, by a man dressed up

as a gorilla. The harsh denial causes Enoch to experience a momentarily acute form of

disorientation. When he comes to his senses, Enoch's humiliation is so palpable that the seeds of

hate have infected him: "Enoch had an urgent need to insult somebody immediately; it was the

only thing that could give his feelings even temporary relief."[270] Eventually, Enoch calms down,

steals the gorilla suit, and the last scene we see from Enoch is when he is dressed like an animal,

with his arm extended to an unsuspecting couple in the park; Enoch is looking yet again for

intimacy and recognition: "The young man turned his neck just in time to see the gorilla standing

a few feet away, hideous and black, with its hand extended. He . . . disappeared silently into the

woods. She, as soon as she turned her eyes, fled screaming down the highway. The gorilla stood

as though surprised and presently its arm fell to its side."[271] Ultimately, the "new jesus" – the all-

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[269] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 180-1.

[270] Ibid., 182.

[271] Ibid., 200. O'Gorman, following Jon Lance Bacon, counters the common critical assertion that Enoch's donning of the gorilla suit is symbolic of his "descent into a bestial state," and, instead, offers that it traces back to Enoch's Binx-like love for moviegoing, his "envy of the 'star' and his desire for 'a new and improved self,' one fit for the big screen." Yet, it seems that

man – provides no reconciliation for Enoch, who, though alienated like Haze, at least recognizes his need for significant others.

The Absence of Communal Depictions of Reconciliation in *Wise Blood*

While for O'Connor's Christian readers, her violent exposure of autonomous moderns makes for compelling literature driven by orthodox belief, I would propose that O'Connor's focus on autonomous, alienated protagonists also helps illuminate what is often dissatisfying about her depictions of redemption. Though *Wise Blood* lacks intentional distortions of revelation and grace more typical of her later works, its ending is not without a violent depiction of one aspect of redemption. In the end of the novel, Haze performs a grotesque forms of ascetic penance – placing rocks in his shoes and walking for miles, blinding himself, and wrapping his body in barbed wire – all to *pay* as a form of gratitude, and, presumably, to prove his *authenticity* alongside Asa Hawkes's fakery. The theme of authenticity in *Wise Blood* should not be overlooked. Indeed, if one ethic drives Haze throughout the novel, it is assuredly his authenticity. He is annoyed by anyone who does not live and preach without hypocrisy – most notably Onnie Jay Holy and his modern, social message about humanity's good nature ("You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of."[272]). And, in the end of the novel, Haze's self-blinding in response to the revelation that Hawkes did not actually blind himself is telling of his realization that authenticity comes from submitting in faith to Christ. Yet, what is also notable about this particular depiction of redemption is how radically alienated Haze remains even unto death. Indeed, toward the end of the novel, even his landlady's attempts to reach out to

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both of these readings reconcile with my reading that it is ultimately about Enoch's desire for the basic intimacy of recognition. O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads*, 169.

[272] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 152.

him are to no avail. Tellingly, she pleads to Haze, "If we don't help each other, Mr. Motes,

there's nobody to help us . . . the world is a empty place."[273] Ultimately, I have to agree with

Sarah Gordon and John D. Sykes – who have both effectively pointed out the lack of significant,

redemptive depictions of community life and charitable love in O'Connor's fiction.[274] Three

particular reasons for the lack of depictions of charitable forms of reconciliation in O'Connor's

work seem especially revealing.

First, O'Connor's novels are *sacramental* in the sense that grace and love are embodied

in mysterious ways. Undoubtedly, Catholics have long viewed the sacraments – particularly the

Eucharist and its transubstantiation – as enshrouded in mystery. For Catholics, the sacraments

are not mere symbols, but embodied realities imparting God's grace. And, for Catholic novelists

like O'Connor (and, to a lesser extent, Walker Percy), symbolisms in the novel function not

merely as artistic signs for the reader, but as embodied realities within her depicted world that

strangely redeem her characters. Sykes has noted the seriousness with which O'Connor and

Percy viewed the sacraments: "[T]he sacraments take on a life-and-death importance. For

ultimately, it is only through them that the basic spiritual needs of the self can be met. . . . [T]he

sacraments reconcile us to God, satisfying our need for transcendence."[275] As mentioned above

in chapter three, this view of the sacraments forces one in a problematic direction. For, if the

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[273] Ibid., 231.

[274] While I agree with Sarah Gordon's criticism of Wood for remaining ultimately uncritical of O'Connor's dark depictions of redemption, I find Wood's critique of Gordon's feminist reading of O'Connor's unwillingness to refute supposed masculine strategies equally, if not more, critically insightful. See John D. Sykes, Jr., "Southern Strangers and the Sacramental Community," *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2007), 153-71. Regarding Gordon's similar critique of community life, and particularly of Wood, see: Gordon, *The Obedient Imagination*, 201-22. And for Wood's critique of Gordon's overly feminist reading of O'Connor, see: Wood, "The Failure of Aesthetic and Moral Intelligence in Recent Criticism of Flannery O'Connor," *Faith and Reason* 31.4 (2006): 542-6.

[275] Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, 170.

sacraments offer a mystical form of self-transcendence through transubstantiated things, then

God's gracious and restorative purposes are predominantly through the things of Creation rather

than the active beings of Creation. Commenting on O'Connor's Eucharistic vision, Hauerwas

and Wood note that Christian fiction will be characterized by "a necessary alterity, since the

central Christian premise is that the *world* made and redeemed by God is constantly interrupted

and *transfigured* by revelation."[276] These commitments to a sacramental vision of the world and

novel writing ultimately force O'Connor to counter individualistic tendencies by depicting

worlds which are uninhabitable for her characters because they come up against this strange form

of Christian *otherness*. Of course, what is problematic in terms of depicting redemption in this

way is that this Christian *otherness* never becomes affirmingly familiar to her protagonists via

faithful human agency. And, I would argue that this lack in O'Connor's fiction is connected, in

part, to her avoidance of didacticism.

O'Connor may have been *excessively* avoiding didacticism, or, church-fiction. She

viewed many Christian writers as profiting off of moralistic utilitarianism. O'Connor reflects her

concern with avoiding preachy fiction when she says that "[Christians] are not content to stay

within our limitations and make something that is simply a good in and by itself. Now we want

to make something that will have some utilitarian value. Yet what is good in itself glorifies God

because it reflects God. The artist has his hands full and does his duty if he attends to his art. He

can safely leave evangelizing to the evangelists."[277] Yet, based on the lack of affirmative

depictions of reconciliations in her stories, O'Connor seems to have succumbed to a false

either/or whereby the reconciliatory truth of the evangelist could not be realistically depicted in

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[276] Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood, "How the Church Became Invisible: A Christian Reading of American Literary Tradition," *Religion and Literature* 38.1 (Spring 2006): 73. Emphasis added.

[277] O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 171.

action by the fiction-writer. Yet, in addition to the avoidance of didacticism, we could add one other compelling reason for the lack of positive community life in O'Connor's fiction: her stance against liberalistic social gospels.

O'Connor often felt compelled to attack social gospels which obviated the eternally salvific nature of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. A point O'Connor makes in one of her letters seems to correspond to a scene in *Wise Blood*. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins on June 19th, 1957, O'Connor retorts, "I don't really think the standard of judgment, the missing link, you spoke of that you find in my stories emerges from any religion by Christianity, because it concerns specifically Christ and the Incarnation, the fact that there has been a unique intervention in history. It's not a matter in these stories of Do Unto Others. That can be found in any ethical culture series. It is the fact of the Word made flesh."[278] O'Connor's revulsion for a simplistic gospel of "Do Unto Others" is also reflected in *Wise Blood*, when Sabbath Hawks receives a response in the local newspaper for a letter she wrote regarding whether she could be sexually promiscuous since she – a bastard – would not enter the kingdom of heaven anyway: "Dear Sabbath, Light necking is acceptable, but I think your real problem is one of adjustment to the modern world. Perhaps you ought to re-examine your religious values to see if they meet your needs in Life. A religious experience can be a beautiful addition to living if you put it in the proper presepctive and do not let it warf you. Read some books on Ethical Culture."[279] The point is closely related to O'Connor's certain self-awareness and repugnance for the Americanist civic religion that Dwight D. Eisenhower was peddling. For these reasons, one wonders if O'Connor could imaginatively conceive of an affirmative, communal depiction of redemptive

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[278] O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1988), 226-7.
[279] O'Connor, *Wise Blood*, 117.

reconciliation. For O'Connor, depictions of gospel-centered interpersonal reconciliation or affirmative forms of community life would appear concomitant with modern, Christ-less sociality.

Yet, one wonders what O'Connor would think of some of the Catholic sociologists that have arisen since her death. Various recent scholars such as Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre[280] have pointed out that human agents understand their lives within the context of narratives, and that these narratives, if they are fulfilling, are necessarily communal; and, thus, they are necessarily in need of charitable forms of reconciliation.[281] Further, Peter L. Berger (though, unlike Taylor and MacIntyre, a Lutheran) has used the phrase "signal of transcendence" to posit that certain actions point to our ability to overcome life's woes, and also point to a state – an afterlife perhaps – where these moments of redemptive overcoming might be permanent. One of Berger's examples of these transcendent signals is the redemptive act of laughter.[282] What is striking about Berger's concept is that these signals of transcendence almost always, if not always, occur in social contexts. Indeed, the terminologies of transcendence – grace, mercy, forgiveness, gift, blessing – most often occur within intimate communities constituted by interpersonal familiarity.

Thus, what strikes me as particularly dissatisfying about O'Connor's redemptive depictions is the absence of interpersonal reconciliation when this is what her critique of autonomous, alienated moderns calls for.[283] Or, as Sykes has put it: "Intense scrutiny of the fact

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[280] See, for instance, Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* and Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*.
[281] See Chapter Three above for an expansion of these ideas.
[282] Peter L. Berger, *Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience* (New York: W DE G, 1997) 205.
[283] Many critics have read O'Connor's depiction of redemption in the end of *Wise Blood* as an embellished form of the Protestant mortification of worldliness. Yet, critics have been largely uncritical of this excessive mortification, or the implicit critique of Protestantism it would entail

of alienation may show the need for communion, but it does not supply the lack."[284] To expand

on Sykes's pointed critique, I would offer that, in O'Connor's fiction, if God reveals himself

violently via the scorching sun or the murderous misfit, then these redemptive depictions

fundamentally de-familiarize God in a way that negates the implications of the risen Christ for

the modern world. To drive this final point home (and I mean this existentially as opposed to a

blithe cliché) and reference once more O'Connor's affinity with Kierkegaardian thought, it is

telling that Sykes notes that the prevailing image in O'Connor's fiction is "[p]hysical suffering as

imitation Christi." Sykes's assertion is quite similar to Craig Hinkson's critique of the late

Kierkegaard's thought. Hinkson comments that Kierkegaard's later emphasis on the

contemporaneous model of Christ's suffering is problematic because "in the end, the Christian

who would imitate Christ assumes suffering not out of concern for his neighbor's well-being, but

out of the priority (and, hence, merit) that the suffering enjoys in its own right."[285] What this

overemphasis entails is the de-emphasis of the resurrected Christ. Hinkson continues, saying,

"[T]he problem is that on SK's presentation the believer's contemporaneous imitation of *Christ*

the model is unqualified by the *Christ the redeemer's* enabling presence."[286] Ultimately, the

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given its individualistic nature. Richard Giannone seems exemplary of this problem: "The conversion of Hazel Motes from cruel nihilist to unperturbed hesychast embodies O'Connor's radical wisdom for those seeking to dispel the poison of the modern world. She proposes a detachment from a decadent society, a withdrawal not with proud contempt but from a need to be true to oneself. For Motes to find his true self, he must cast off the rule of fabricated social and political compulsions. Because he, like the culture, is so fully captivated by the power of self-will, only a stronger power outside himself can force a clean break from the world. . . . Motes steps outside the American life that was promoting power and violence and an artificial self rooted in ego." Giannone, *Flannery O'Connor, Hermit Novelist* (Chicago: U of Illinois P, 2000), 63.
[284] Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, 161.
[285] Craig Hinkson, "Cross without Resurrection," *Kierkegaard's Theology: Cross and Grace. The Lutheran and Idealist Traditions in His Thought* (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1993), 231-2.
[286] Ibid., 237.

image of the *risen* Christ is foundational for any notion of a reconciled community, for it is the image that entails hope. Indeed, theologically, the risen Christ manifests himself in the church community – which is understood to be the *body of Christ*. Resurrection after death – *new life* – is the image that entails the most radical of freedoms, which is the freedom in knowing that because this life is not all there is, one is able to lay his life down for the other and set in motion the perpetuation of mutual self-giving. And, paradoxically, these self-givings are precisely the constituents which form the contours of fulfilling identity.

Conclusion

In *Wise Blood*, O'Connor provides an insightful criticism of autonomous notions of freedom; her depiction reveals the consequences of humans *manipulating* the Incarnation of God in Christ to their liking – of making a jesus in their own image. To deify oneself is a form of asceticism because it is a form of violence against one's essential self. Thus, what is dissatisfying about the conclusion to Haze's narrative is its equally ascetic nature. For while Haze's achieved authenticity signals the recognition of his need for faith in Christ, his ascetic form of gratitude lacks any Christ-like concern for fellow human beings. We have loved, and will continue to love, O'Connor's fiction because of her compelling stories, authentic commitments, humorous wit, and entertaining, literary use of violence. Further, I believe that O'Connor's use of violence is motivated by her orthodox view of revelation and its necessity over against modern autonomy. However, O'Connor's fixation on violently revealing the limitations of the autonomous modern may ultimately prove dissatisfying because her antithetical approach remains, ultimately, unqualified by a communal affirmative.

Part 2, Chapter 5

Binx's Search for Meaningful Intimacy: From Onanistic Internal-Monologues and Detached

Conversations to Marriage as Speech-Act

Introduction

Critics of Walker Percy's works have been primarily interested in Percy's devotion to

Søren Kierkegaard, and the unique nature of human language. And rightfully so: Percy often

spoke of the Danish philosopher's influence on his conversion to Christianity, and Percy's non-

fiction is almost solely concerned with semiotic theory. He believed language could bridge the

gap between modern science and historical, orthodox Christianity. Undoubtedly, the former

interest (Kierkegaard) and the latter pursuit (language) were united in one chief concern: the

nature of the self. The two themes – which we might effectively construe thematically as

alienation and dialogue – come together perhaps most compellingly and overtly in Percy's

award-winning first novel, *The Moviegoer*. Kierkegaardian phraseology is obvious throughout

the novel, and Jack "Binx" Bolling's ostensible search for his life's purpose seems tied to

language. That is, Binx is searching for meaning – to recover the relationship between word and

world, and, particularly, to understand the meaning of his own place within that world.

To review, in Part One, we came upon three primary conclusions: (1) there is an essential

self which the human agent must come to understand and submit to in order to make freedom

and fulfillment realistic and coalescing possibilities; (2) one necessity of this essential self is that

it needs significant commitments to other persons in order to formulate, or, realize, identity – and

this necessarily involves conversation, devotion, and intimacy; and (3) to sustain these

fundamentally ethical commitments, a transcendent, authoritative, and particular source is

required if these commitments are to be binding.

Binx's Kierkegaardian Search for Meaningful Identity

Primarily, *The Moviegoer* depicts – in its Kierkegaardian terms – Binx's conversion from alienated esthete to committed ethicist; hence, my approach will take *Either/Or* as the novel's primary critical frame. Further, to aptly connect this Kierkegaardian approach with Percy's concern with semiotics, I will argue that Binx's search does not just take him from esthetic alienation to ethical commitment, but from onanistic internal-monologues to intimate conversations, and, finally, to the speech-act[287] of marital intercourse. Stated another way, Binx begins to realize meaningful identity when he recognizes that his onanistic internal-monologues produce solipsistic waste, while his intimate conversations signal an encounter with meaning; Binx's conversational encounter with meaning intimates its divine source, culminating in the fruitful intercourse of marriage.

Before considering Percy's debt to Kierkegaard as it relates to the existential dialectic of freedom and alienation, it is helpful to consider the connections between O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and *The Moviegoer* in order to elucidate their thematic similarities alongside their differing approaches as both a connection and transition between this and the preceding chapters. Farrell O'Gorman has most notably connected the two novels by identifying them together as apocalyptic, postwar American novels:

> O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Percy's *The Moviegoer*, radically different as they
> are in tone and character, are definitively postwar southern fictions both in their
> protagonists (Hazel Motes is a veteran of World War II, Binx Bolling of the

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[287] J. L. Austin's and Mikhail Bakhtin's works – both critical when discussing the nature of language – will be explored further below.

Korean War) and in their profound engagement with a new American culture that

was beginning to dominate the South. Each critique of that culture – its rabid

consumerism as communicated through pervasive advertising and embodied most

fully in the automobile, its complacency under the sway of Hollywood and

soothing media messengers of the public good – is presented in a setting

characterized by an underlying apocalyptic mood.[288]

Essentially, both O'Connor and Percy provide unique visions of the metaphysical homelessness

ailing Americans following World War II; further, both visions are distinctly Catholic in their

illumination of existential problems, and both incorporate one uniquely American cultural

artifact: the automobile.

Yet, however similar are the thematic elements, the authors' stylistic approaches are of

course far different. Percy's novel is a philosophical one inspired by the likes of a Sartrean novel,

while the grotesqueries in O'Connor's novels are eminently inspired by Poe-like macabre. Percy,

given his profound interest in language, creates novels that are dialogue-driven, while O'Connor,

seeking to shock her sleeping readers out of the nihilistic malaise, creates novels filled with

revelatory violences. The prevailing image in O'Connor's stories is "[p]hysical suffering as

imitation Christi,"[289] while the prevailing image in Percy's novels is conversation. Thus, because

Percy's protagonists struggle for authenticity via interpersonal intimacy, Percy's novels seem, in

a way, much closer to offering an affirmation of the self's communal nature. As it relates to *The

Moviegoer* and *Wise Blood*, this fundamental difference in the two authors' Kierkegaardian

critique of autonomous agency seems nowhere more apparent than in their endings. As

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[288] Farrell O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 2004), 166.
[289] John D. Sykes Jr., *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation* (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2007), 165.

O'Gorman notes, while *Wise Blood* ends with a grotesque death following the rejection of a strange marriage between Hazel Motes and Mrs. Flood, *The Moviegoer* ends with a rather comedic marriage between its two alienated protagonists, Binx and Kate.[290] Percy offers a coalescence in his fiction between a Kierkegaardian critique of autonomous, alienated suburbanites, and an almost sacramental view of language – and certainly of marriage. Therefore, our primary interest, again, will be to draw connections between Binx's transition from alienated, monological esthete to committed, conversational ethicist. But, first, it will be helpful to consider the relationship between Percy and Kierkegaard, and to elucidate Percy's debt to the Danish philosopher as it relates specifically to the existential dialectic of autonomous freedom and alienation.

Undoubtedly, criticism of Percy's novels is rife with considerations of Kierkegaard's influence in a way that is unique when compared to O'Connor, and even John Updike. Of course, the critical recapitulation is necessary given the numerous interviews Percy gave in which he admitted his debt to Kierkegaard not only for his novel-writing, but, albeit most ironically, for his conversion to Catholicism. To narrow our critical field of interest as it relates to the relationship between Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Kierkegaardian influences, I want to focus on the similarities between the two thinkers in light of the two primary works from Kierkegaard that were examined above in chapter one: *The Sickness unto Death* and *Either/Or*.[291] In response to the epigraph in *The Moviegoer* which is taken from *SUD*, many critics have commented on the importance of *SUD* for Percy's first novel. However, one critic –

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[290] O'Gorman, *Peculiar Crossroads*, 170-1.

[291] Not only do I take this narrowed focus to be thematically warranted, but, in an interview with Bradley R. Dewey in 1974, Percy unwittingly warrants the frame. In the interview, Percy notes that the first two of Kierkegaard's works which he struggled through were *Either/or* and *The Sickness unto Death*. Walker Percy, *Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson: U P of Mississippi, 1985), 107.

Ralph Wood – has effectively and extensively synthesized *SUD* and *E/O* as a critical frame for

The Moviegoer.[292] Given both Percy's firm understanding that the self must be itself

"transparently before God"[293] in order to avoid an imbalance of the synthesis between necessity

and possibility, and given his incorporation of the themes associated with Kierkegaard's three

stages, *SUD* and *E/O* seem, ultimately, the most appropriate works to examine when considering

Kierkegaardian themes in *The Moviegoer*.

   Percy was acutely aware of the powerful critique of autonomous notions of freedom

which Kierkegaard put forth in *SUD* and *E/O*. This fact seems most apparent in Percy's satirical

self-help book *Lost in the Cosmos*. In a chapter humorously sub-titled, "Why it is the

Autonomous Self becomes Possessed by the Spirit of the Erotic and the Secret Love of Violence,

and how Unlucky it is that this should have Happened in the Nuclear Age," Percy comments

extensively on Kierkegaard's esthetic sphere, and then tellingly notes,

> Both Kierkegaard and modern semiotics give us leave to speak of the self as
>
> being informed – 'possessed,' if you like, at certain historical stages of belief and
>
> unbelief. It becomes possible, whether one believes in God or not, soul or not, to
>
> agree that in an age in which the self is not informed by cosmological myths, by
>
> totemism, by belief in God – whether the God of Christianity, Judaism, or Islam –
>
> it must necessarily and by reason of its own semiotic nature be informed by
>
> something else.[294]

A few points are of note in this passage which helps illuminate our concerns. Percy, via

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[292] Ralph Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption: Christian Faith and Comic Vision in Four American Novelists* (Notre Dame: U of Notre Dame P, 1988), 158-77.

[293] In the same interview with Dewey, Percy comments, "[In *The Sickness unto Death*] he says something that is . . . staggering[.] Namely, that . . . the only way to be yourself is to be yourself transparently before God." Percy, *Conversations*, 110.

[294] Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1983), 179.

Kierkegaard, recognizes that the self is essentially informed. If the human agent does not ground

himself in God, or, relate himself to God, then he will necessarily relate himself to something or

someone else. And Percy is inclined to conclude that Americans have been predominantly

informed by a culture of sex and violence. In other words, because of the essential givenness of

human agency, one is never totally self-positing or self-directing. Further, because of his

particularly Catholic view of language, and his reading of Martin Buber, Gabriel Marcel, and

Thomas Merton, Percy recognized the self's need for intersubjectivity – or, the intimacy of

shared meaning between persons. Wood aptly captures the place of autonomy, alienation, and the

need for community which thematically pervades *The Moviegoer*: "Binx Bolling gradually

discovers that the ego is a vortex. A life of pure consciousness leads to the solipsistic conclusion

that nothing but one's supreme selfhood is real. If there be resurrection from this solitary grave,

it is found in a transcendent summons out of self-absorption and into community."[295] Wood

captures Percy's recognition that the self's need for God's revelation also has implications for

the self's need for community life,[296] and he also recognizes the "gradual" move Binx undergoes

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[295] Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption*, 169.

[296] Sykes and others have asserted that Percy ultimately remained too committed to Kierkegaard to avoid individualistic tendencies. While I agree with the assertion overall (and will return to it below), I think that Percy was not just implicitly aware of the need for community life as a diversion from Kierkegaard. The recognition was rather explicit. In the interview with Dewey, Percy comments that "[t]his has always been a stumbling block to me. I think that Kierkegaard was simply wrong or carried his opposition to Hegel's system – objectivity – too far. Kierkegaard seemed to set up subjectivity as the only alternative. That has always bothered me, because I think he is falling into the trap of emotion, inwardness. He talks about subjectivity, inwardness, and so forth, yet never makes any provisions as far as I can tell, for understanding or an explanation of intersubjectivity – caring for the other person, or how to know other people." Percy then continues, "About the time I was having trouble with Kierkegaard's subjectivity and inwardness, I got on to the Jewish writer-theologian, Martin Buber, who was strong on intersubjectivity. And about the same time I got interested in approaching it from the point of view of language, starting from behavior as the genesis of the spoken word. I thought I saw a way of developing a scientific view of intersubjectivity and wrote a couple of articles on the subject." Percy, *Conversations*, 119.

from alienated to committed.

One of the more significant Kierkegaardian moves Percy makes in *The Moviegoer*, as evidenced by the epigraph to the novel from *SUD*, is to depict – and to a certain extent laud – the human agent's ability to recognize that he is in despair. The epigraph reads, "[T]he specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Binx's recognition of despair – even if he is ultimately unaware of its cause – is ultimately what sparks both his "search," and his esthetic diversions from the psychological malaise which he feels so acutely. Due to Binx's heightened awareness of despair, another term he employs to describe what he takes as a cause of malaise is "everydayness." Binx's use of the term is perhaps best understood alongside his thoughts regarding 98% of Americans believing in God and the remaining 2% being agnostics or atheists: "I cannot even answer this, the simplest and most basic of all questions: Am I, in my search, a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them? On my honor, I do not know the answer."[297] According to Binx, everydayness is a kind of stagnancy when one has ceased from the universal human task of becoming, and meaning is something that is taken for granted – domesticated to fit one's immediate needs. It encompasses a kind of mindless conformity to societal standards and obligations, without understanding what one's life ultimately means. However, Binx is not only able to recognize everydayness in others, but he is able to recognize this "enemy" in himself; for instance, he awakes one morning in his old place "in the grip of everydayness."[298] What is most noteworthy about Binx's "search" – particularly his hyper-awareness of despair, everydayness, and malaise in both himself and others – is the oft detached position he takes in

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[297] Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 14.
[298] Ibid., 145.

relation to himself and the people around him. Percy seems to place an inherent value on Binx's search because he is at least aware of his despair; yet, the virtues of Binx's "search" might be too revered, for the detached observer is even less likely to become transparent with his fellows. In other words, one's detachment from inauthentic everydayness only intensifies the conditions for alienation and despair, for one is detached from the primary sources of authenticity. Of course, while Percy may affirm Binx's detached-observer tendencies to some extent, he is also illuminating what he sees as a problematic form of detachment, and this is most apparent in Binx's tendencies as a Kierkegaardian esthete.

Binx as Kierkegaard's Esthete

In order to more fruitfully consider the influence of Kierkegaard's "esthetic sphere" on Percy's first novel, it is helpful to return to some of the defining attributes of the esthete that we concerned ourselves with in chapter one. Kierkegaard's model esthete, "A," lives within the category of immediacy; that is, Kierkegaard's esthete – to varying degrees – lives in the moment. He is primarily concerned with desire fulfillment – particularly through the momentary transcendence provided by the arts and sexual relationships. He avoids ethical commitments, and inhabits a general state of depression. "A" warns that one should "stay clear of friendship,"[299] and "never become involved in marriage."[300] In perhaps one of his most evidently self-stultifying assertions regarding freedom and ethical commitments, "A" warns that friendship and marriage are dangers to one's selfhood: "One must always guard against contracting a relationship by which one can become many. That is why even friendship is dangerous, marriage even more so.

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[299] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I* ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1987), 295-6.
[300] Ibid., 296.

They do say that marriage partners become one, but this is very obscure and mysterious talk. If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom[.]"[301] "A" cannot imagine ethical commitments being anything but boring, unthinking conformity. Yet, his shunning of any potential commitments is precisely what perpetuates his despair. The last point to consider regarding our analysis of *The Moviegoer* is the distinction between immediate seduction and reflective seduction. Referring to Don Juan as a paradigmatic figure for the esthetic existence, "A" makes the distinction:

> In the musical Don Juan, there would be the extensive seducer; in the other, the intensive. So the latter Don Juan is not presented as possessing his object with one single blow – he is not the immediately qualified seducer; he is the reflective seducer. That which occupies us here is the subtlety, the cunning, whereby he knows how to steal into a girl's heart, the dominion he knows how to gain over it, the enthralling, deliberate, progressive seduction. How many he has seduced is of no importance here; what occupies us is the artistry, the meticulousness, the profound cunning with which he seduces. . . . The musical Don Juan enjoys the satisfaction; the reflective Don Juan enjoys the deception.[302]

While both the immediate and the more reflective esthete avoid potential committed relationships with women, the more reflective esthete – the Seducer – enjoys creating the circumstances for seducing a woman, while the immediate esthete enjoys the pleasure. Binx, it seems to me, is the immediate esthete who avoids commitments, and whose primary pleasures,

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[301] Ibid., 297.
[302] Ibid., 107-8.

in this particular case, are his secretaries and moviegoing.[303]

The most obvious way that Binx fits the description of Kierkegaard's esthete is the way that he treats his secretaries. Discussing his "evening outings and weekend trips," Binx comments that he usually shares these outings with his "secretary."[304] What is notable about the initial statement is that his companion is an anonymity – one which "girls named Marcia, Linda, and now Sharon"[305] fill for Binx as his role-players. The relationship might be described as an onanistic one for Binx because it is primarily about his personal fulfillment – his avoidance of everydayness – and the secretaries are merely anonymous objects for achieving this fulfillment. Binx provides an extensive description of the situation:

> Naturally I would like to say that I had made conquests of these splendid girls, my secretaries, casting them off one after the other like old gloves, but it would not be strictly true. They could be called love affairs, I suppose. They started off as love affairs anyway, fine careless raptures in which Marcia or Linda (but not yet Sharon) and I would go spinning along the Gulf Coast, lie embracing in a deserted cove of Ship Island, and hardly believe our good fortune, hardly believe that the world could contain such happiness.[306]

Clearly, Binx's secretaries have provided him with moments of intoxicating pleasure and enjoyment – moments that have been transcendent in the sense of making all seem right with the world. Of course, at some point the transcendent highs of the evenings and weekends out with his secretaries must end and then the dissatisfaction when the empty everydayness of potential

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[303] However, I will argue in chapter six that Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom is akin to Kierkegaard's "Seducer."
[304] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 7.
[305] Ibid., 8.
[306] Ibid., 8.

ethical commitments sets in. However, car rides with secretaries are not the only momentarily

transcendent pleasures in which Binx indulges; he also, as the book's title suggests, enjoys going

to the movies.

For Binx, moviegoing is both an esthetic diversion from the boring reality of the

workaday world, and, due to the inherently narrative nature of movies, a means of advnacing his

search for meaning. In order to escape the mundane everydayness – the unavoidable fact of his

seemingly meaningless existence – Binx goes to the movies. The movies and the actors who fill

them are his bodiless companions. They are the ones to whom he is primarily committed. This is

implicit in Binx's admission that "[f]or years now I have had no friends. I spend my entire time

working, making money, going to movies, and seeking the company of women."[307] Binx has

few, if any, significant others. When he comments about other people or the state of his culture,

he does not generally refer to a history he has with intimate acquaintances (his own narrative);

instead, he refers to an actor or a scene from a movie (a contrived narrative). Though John F.

Desmond does not directly tie Binx's moviegoing to Kierkegaard's esthetic sphere, he certainly

alludes to it when he says, "At times Binx's moviegoing seems the refuge of the romantic[.] . . .

Movies and moviegoing can provide a temporary escape from the anxiety of living over the

'abyss,' an 'aesthetic solution' to the terrors of alienation."[308] Essentially, movies offer Binx yet

another detachment from reality. Yet, again, there is also a sense in which Binx's state as the

detached observer is portrayed positively in virtue of the fact that he is at least on the search. At

one point, Binx tellingly comments,

> The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in
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> despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place – but

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[307] Ibid., 40-1.
[308] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 44.

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. What

do you seek – God? you ask with a smile. I hesitate to answer, since all other

Americans have settled the matter for themselves[.][309]

Hence, Percy does not merely use movies as functional diversions for his esthetic protagonist; he

also uses movies to signify Binx's laudable desire to transcend everydayness. Thus, moviegoing

– the essential motif of Percy's novel – represents Binx's recognition and avoidance of

inauthentic conformity to the everydayness of societal norms, and also his inability to transcend

this conformity without alienating himself from the significant relationships which he needs as

an existing human being.[310] Hence, while Binx is reading the signs of meaning which the movies

provide, he is still in need of the kind of semiosis – an activity of signs producing meaning –

which will place him in the cosmos; or, Binx needs a significant, committed community life

which will provide authentic content for his existence.

Percy's Sacramental View of Language and the Importance of Speech-Act in *The*

Moviegoer

Before elucidating the contrast between Binx's onanaistic, internal-monological

relationships and his intimate, conversational relationships, we would do well to consider Percy's

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[309] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 13.

[310] Desmond also highlights this tension when he says, "In sum, in his complex handling of the moviegoing motif Percy acknowledges the transfiguring power of film in the semiotic web of modern culture – as diversion, as sign of the times, or as clue to the search. But like Binx and Lonnie at the Moonlite Drive-In, the moviegoer must be 'on to' the illusory nature of film as sign, enjoying its satisfactions while recognizing that the truer reality is to be found not as a solitary moviegoer but in the suffering community of the world." Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 45.

sacramental view of language. As we saw above in chapter 3, Percy valued language and semiotic theory because he considered it the last essential quality uniquely distinguishing humanity in the modern age: "Only language and other symbolic behavior (art, music) seems to remain as the sole remaining indisputably unique attribute of man. If language can be shown to be within the capability of apes, dolphins, and humpback whales, the dethronement of man will be complete."[311] Percy recognized that the nature of language implied man's unique ability to rise above behaviorism in mysterious ways. Percy took this mysteriousness to be significant in relation to his particularly Catholic, sacramental realism. Wood, for instance, alludes to Percy's sacramental view of language and semiotics when he says that "[t]he mysterious phenomenon of speech is the real basis of Percy's natural theology. . . . [H]e seeks to show the gift of articulate breath is the single characteristic distinguishing our species from all others."[312] However, Desmond goes a step further than Wood and provides extensive commentary regarding Percy's sacramental view of language as it relates to *The Moviegoer* specifically, which is worth quoting in full, for it proposes that Percy is concerned with "real presence":

> [U]nderlying the semiotic structure of the novel, and informing it at every turn, is what I will call the community of real presence. This is the reality of the presence of God in the 'here-and-now,' manifested especially in Percy's use of sacramental signs. Binx is a muser who intuits this true invisible community in his heart and longs for it, but he is constantly distracted from it. There is a terror in this presence as well, since it threatens to break the closed heart open into love. The community of real presence is the human community into which the divine Logos has come, and where He is always present. . . . Binx's persistent fascination with

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[311] Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 169.
[312] Wood, *Comedy of Redemption*, 150.

the mystery and wonder of the here-and-now is an indelible sign of the reality of

that community and of the spirit guiding his search.[313]

Ultimately, Desmond affirms the search for community which Percy depicts on the basis of his

sacramental-semiological approach, and the search for meaning this entails for Binx. Yet, as we

saw in chapter 3, some critics, like Sykes, counter proponents of Percy's realism like Desmond:

"My point, in opposition to Desmond's presentation of Percy, is that the tension between faith

and reason was bound to be relaxed in favor of reason so long as Percy used Peirce to establish

'no less than an anthropological basis for the creation of a revitalized organon of truth.' The goal

itself was problematic."[314] Sykes finds problematic Percy's tendency toward a "kind of

totalism,"[315] whereby Christianity is provable in an objectively rational sense on the basis of

God's imparting of grace through nature. In short, Percy's Thomist realism is adapted to a

sacramental theory of language and semiology. Hence, Percy's "sacramental community" is a

kind of mystical intersubjectivity based on his view of the Eucharist: "Percy saw the mind/body

question and the relation between spirit and matter, in terms of mankind's fall[.] . . . The

'scandal' and mystery of the Eucharist is that it radically affirms the real presence of the risen

Christ in matter (bread and wine), as the act of transubstantiation in the Mass enacts incarnation

and resurrection of the God-man.[316] While I agree with Sykes's criticism of Percy and his

proponents like Desmond, Percy's search for community as embodied by a sacramental view of

language that involves "real presence" seems especially close to the idea of a communal "faithful

presence" presented in chapter three. The basis for Percy's redemptive reconciliation between

alienated protagonist and community will be considered more extensively below. Before

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[313] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 43.

[314] Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, 110.

[315] Ibid., 108.

[316] John F. Desmond, "Walker Percy's Eucharistic Vision," *Renascence* 52.3 (Spring 2000): 220.

considering Binx's transition from alienated internal-monologue to conversational intimacy, I want to consider how J. L. Austin's theory of "speech-acts" provides a helpful elucidation of what is positively communal in Percy's linguistically-minded communal redemptions.

One way we could describe the tension Binx experiences in his alienation is to say that his detachment enables him to observe the inauthenticity in others, but that his detached stance forces him, according to Percy, to be a "victim of . . . Rene Descartes."[317] That is, Binx's projected reality as a Cartesian dualist is excessively constituted by his self-consciousness. Therefore, he must find a way to relent his stance as detached observer by concretizing himself in the world as part of a community, while still somehow retaining his sense of freedom and authenticity. A helpful way of considering Binx's gradual transition toward a meaningful identity constituted by his significant commitments – particularly considering that conversation is the dominant communal image in Percy's fiction – is to examine J. L. Austin's theory of speech-acts. Austin asserts that certain sentences we utter are necessarily active, rather than merely descriptive:

> I propose to call it a *performative sentence* or a performative utterance, or, for
> short, 'a performative.' The term 'performative' will be used in a variety of
> cognate ways and constructions, much as the term 'imperative' is. The name is
> derived, of course, from 'perform,' the usual verb with the noun 'action': it
> indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action – it is not
> normally thought of as just saying something.[318]

As it relates to our concerns with Percy, *The Moviegoer*, and the communal nature of selfhood,

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[317] Walker Percy, *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson, MS: U P of Mississippi, 1993), 160.

[318] J. L. Austin, *How to do things with Words* (Cambridge, Harvard U P, 1962), 6-7.

the most insightful example of a sentence which "is, or is a part of, the doing of an action" that

Austin gives concerns the act of marriage; when the persons involved say "'I do (sc. Take this

woman to be my lawful wedded wife)' – as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony," the

two, by the act of their expressions, have become united in marriage.[319] Yet, knowing that our

words are often rendered void by the incongruities between speech and action, Austin asserts that

in order for speech-acts to be genuinely – or, authentically – "performative" actions, they must

be "happy." In order for the particular speech-act to avoid unhappiness, it must be constituted by

mutually acknowledged conventions, proper reasons and motives, and the appropriate

circumstances for the given situation.[320] In other words, the groom's practiced "I Do" the week

before the ceremony is not felicitous in the sense of binding him to his bride, because the

practiced expression is not a properly acknowledged and established action; and, further, the

general sense of awkwardness that often accompanies the rehearsal ceremony can be attributed

to the infelicity of the words rehearsed – they are ultimately rendered void. As a final example,

if, when saying "I Do," the groom is planning a quick divorce to cash in on prenuptial

agreements, the speech-act is far from "happy," for the motives are not congruent with the

intention of the speech-act. Hence, a speech-act as serious as marriage necessarily involves the

intimacy of both recognition and commitments, or, a knowledge that has been birthed by the

trust of familiarity. Given the necessity to define the parameters of that which is felicitous – and

the necessity that these definitions be mutually agreed upon and maintained – faith is implicitly

involved in a speech-act. The speech-actor has faith that the receiver will understand and receive

his speech-act as intended, and the receiver has the faith that the speech-actor offers a felicitous

"performative." Autin's theory of speech-acts and its application to marital commitment will

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[319] Ibid., 5.
[320] Ibid., 14-5.

prove helpful as we consider the ethical change Binx undergoes toward the end of *The Moviegoer*, and why Percy's realistic sacramental-semiotic approach to community life is ultimately problematic.

The Evidence of Binx's Onanistic Alienation in his Internal Monologues

Much of the first half of the novel consists of Binx's internal-monologues – his detached, irony-laden self-consciousness; further, Binx's internal-monologues are telling when he is around other people because most of his relationships are onanistic, or, constituted by Binx's manipulation of other people for his own fulfillment. A helpful way to consider the nature of Binx's monological, onanistic relationships is by putting them in Bakhtinian terms. As a refresher of what we briefly explored in chapter 3, Bakhtin asserts that in the midst of heteroglossia, "language is stratified not only into linguistic dialects in the strict sense of the word . . . but also . . . into languages that are socio-ideological: languages of social groups, 'professional' and 'generic' languages, languages of generations and so forth."[321] Bakhtin goes on to suggest that these layers of language illustrate that "language, for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other."[322] Bakhtin's analysis builds upon the recognition that other people's influence is a source of one's identity. And, according to Bakhtin, the novel is a "diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized."[323] It seems apparent that Bakhtin's theories regarding language, dialogue, and influence in the novel center on conversation; further, the influence of ideology happens through the self-revealing transparency of conversation. Because Percy's mode of depiction

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[321] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 271-2.
[322] Ibid., 293.
[323] Ibid., 262.

centers on conversation, it is helpful to consider which characters Binx is transparent with, the nature of those transparencies, and the lasting ideational effects of the conversations. However, given our concern with alienation in *The Moviegoer*, it is also helpful to first consider the nature of Binx's *microdialogues*.

Michael Kobre, who has written the definitive Bakhtinian analysis of Percy's novels, comments that a microdialogue is "a kind of internal monologue in which the character's thoughts are saturated with the words and opinions of others."[324] Kobre goes on to argue extensively that Binx's microdialogues reveal a number of conflicting influences, including his Aunt Emily, his dead father, and even the consumerist culture of middle-class America which Binx surely encounters during his incessant moviegoing and television watching. However, what I want to point out, specifically, is that Binx's microdialogues are characterized by the tension between the excessively unreflective, consumptive culture which he inhabits and the constant detached-observer outlook of a moviegoer's view of the world. This consumptive consciousness coupled with its alienated stance reveal Binx's onanistic tendency to manipulate interactions with others – particularly women – for his personal satisfaction. Yet, these onanistic interactions, because of Binx's alienated detachment, produce only waste. This waste results from Binx's tendency to reduce people to objects of manipulation and, in the process, eliminate the possibility for a life of authenticity which results from significant, intimate relationships. The primary example of how Binx's internal-monologues reveal an onanistic inversion of interpersonal intimacy is his interactions with his latest secretary, Sharon Kincaid. Binx's first extended description of her is telling in its lusty licentiousness:

> Her name is Sharon Kincaid and she comes from Eufala, Alabama. Although she

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[324] Michael Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2000), 2.

has been working for me two weeks, I have not asked her for a date nor spoken of
anything other than business. Yet the fact is that for two weeks I have thought of
little else. She seems quite indifferent so far; and she is not really beautiful. She is
a good-sized girl, at least five feet six and a hundred and thirty-five points – as big
as a majorette[.] . . . Yet she has the most fearful soap-clean good looks. Her
bottom is so beautiful that once as she crossed the room to the cooler I felt my
eyes smart with tears of gratitude.[325]

Binx's external interactions with Sharon have been solely businesslike, yet his thoughts have
been consumed with her as a potential source of pleasure. Later, when Binx and Sharon are
working together in a small space, his internal-monologue continues: "[S]he is close enough to
touch. Today she wears a sleeveless dress of yellow cotton; her arms come out of the armholes as
tenderly as a little girl's. . . . Her back is turned to me, but obliquely[.] . . . As she types, the little
kidney-shaped cushion presses against the small of her back in a nice balance of thrusts. I am in
love with Sharon Kincaid. She knows nothing of this, I think."[326] What is telling about Binx's
hidden thoughts about Sharon is that, to this point, he has not only cut himself off from the
possibility of knowing her or being known by her in any significant way, but the onanistic
content of his internal descriptions implies that he is not likely to make his thoughts transparent.
That is, because Binx seeks Sharon as a potentially pleasurable form of consumptive diversion,
his hidden, onanistic motives reinforce his distance from her.

Once Binx has spent significant time flirting with Sharon – while also avoiding revealing
much about his self, including his despair or his search – he spends a day with her when some of
his fantasies are revealed and fulfilled. Binx and Sharon share a few kisses on the beach and he

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[325] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 65.
[326] Ibid., 67.

reveals to her, "I just want to tell you what's on my mind. . . . You. You and your sweet lips. Sweetheart, before God I can't think about anything in the world but putting my arms around you and kissing your sweet lips. . . . I can't get you out of my mind. Not since you walked into my office in that yellow dress. I'm crazy about you[.]"[327] Binx is feeling good about the afternoon with Sharon, but the inadequacy of it all still looms over him as his microdialogues continue in their onanistic tenor: "We pull into a bay and have a drink under the stars. It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh."[328] Sharon is mangled to a thigh – a piece of flesh that Binx hopes will patch the leaking hole of his despairing existence. Yet, the transparent conversation he is about to have with his half-brother Lonnie will reveal to Binx the utter inauthenticity of both his relationship with Sharon and his detached identity.

Jack's Sacramental Conversation with Lonnie

When Binx and Sharon visit his mother's family, Binx spends some time with his half-brother Lonnie – a devout, 14 year old Catholic – who has an intriguing effect on Binx. Before considering Lonnie's identity and his relationship with Binx, it is interesting to note that, in this particular scene in the novel, Binx is referred to – with unique regularity – by his actual first name, "Jack." The anomaly is perhaps a subtle signal that a shift in identity toward authenticity is about to occur. Binx comments lovingly of Lonnie, who has been stricken to a wheelchair:

> [Lonnie] is my favorite, to tell the truth. Like me, he is a moviegoer. He will go see anything. But we are good friends because he knows I do not feel sorry for him. For one thing, he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in

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[327] Ibid., 131-3.
[328] Ibid., 135-6.

reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ. For another

thing, I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is serene

business.[329]

This initial internal-monologue is significant for a few reasons. Jack's tone has changed

significantly.[330] His description of Lonnie is not laced with scornful, detached irony; rather, it is

filled with direct, authentic admiration and respect. Jack is clearly filled with admiration because,

unlike his Aunt Emily's southern, ethical class system,[331] Lonnie's code of ethics is sacrificial;

Lonnie is both "the least of these" physically, and offers his weakness as a sacrifice for the

spiritually-weakest of these. Not only is Jack's detached, objective-manipulative tone silenced in

the presence of Lonnie, but he hints at a desire to be like his half-brother – who is clearly

intended to be a kind of sacrament of the mystical Body of Christ. That is, Lonnie is one of the

sacramental "real presences" that Desmond refers to. The authentic conversation Lonnie has with

Jack, which is characterized by a genuine give-and-take, has a profound sacramental-

semiological influence on Percy's protagonist. Further, we are reminded of the other religious

voice Jack has within the microdialogue of his consciousness when he speaks of Lonnie's

handicap and his mother: "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

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[329] Ibid., 137.

[330] Kobre describes the influence Lonnie has on Binx's identity this way: "Lonnie ultimately brings out a warmer, less guarded side of Binx. In contrast to Binx's difficult relationship with his mother and his contrived affection for Sharon, his feelings for Lonnie are not complicated by false expectations or a hidden agenda. When talking to Lonnie, Binx neither assumes a pose nor tries to take on some obligatory role. He speaks directly and affectionately, without even the defensiveness that clouds his relationship with Kate. And Lonnie, for his part, is equally direct." Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 64.

[331] It has been noted quite often by critics that the central conflict of the novel is between Binx and his Aunt Emily. While Aunt Emily recognizes Binx's uncommitted aloofness, Binx recognizes that his Aunt Emily's concepts of duty and ethics are ultimately inauthentic because she is mindlessly and baselessly conforming to societal standards.

like all the rest in the one enterprise she has any use for: the canny management of the shocks of life."[332] Though his mother's use of God as a crutch is uniquely tied to the suffering her family has experienced, she is still – according to Jack – not unlike the 98% of Americans who have settled the matter of belief in God for various Eisenhowerian reasons.[333] This voice of disdain for inauthentic religious belief is in stark contrast to Lonnie's authentic belief in the face of literal physical suffering. Yet, it is not only authenticity that is thus brought to the fore via Lonnie's sacramental character, but also the other essential theme: intimacy.

When Jack, Lonnie, and Sharon decide to go see *Fort Dobbs* at the local movie theater, Jack's struggle for intimacy and identity is clearly signified by the contrast between his relationship to Lonnie and his relationship to Sharon:

> A good night: Lonnie happy (he looks around at me with the liveliest sense of the secret between us; the secret is that Sharon is not and never will be onto the little touches we see in the movie and, in the seeing, know that the other sees – as when Clint Walker tells the sadle tramp in the softest easiest old Virginian voice: 'Mister, I don't believe I'd do that if I was you' – Lonnie is beside himself, doesn't know whether to watch Clint Walker or me), this ghost of a theater, a warm Southern night, the Western Desert and this fine big sweet piece, Sharon.[334]

Jack's interactions with Lonnie during the movie exemplify the intersubjectivity that is available when humans are intimate with one another. The depth of knowledge and deep commitment Jack and Lonnie have between and for one another resembles a kind of spiritual intimacy, which Jack, though he may not realize it yet, longs for. Further, the scene clearly contrasts the difference in

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[332] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 142.
[333] President Dwight D. Eisenhower is famous for saying that it doesn't matter what God Americans believe in, so long as they believe in one – a necessity for the good of the country.
[334] Ibid., 143-4.

relationship between Lonnie and Jack – characterized by conversation and intimacy – and the relationship between Sharon and Binx – characterized, predominantly, by monologue, manipulation, and distance. Just before Jack and Sharon are leaving, Lonnie intimates to Jack, "I am still offering my communion for you."[335] Desmond describes Jack's relationship to Lonnie as a kind of semiosis whereby "Lonnie is a living sign of the reality of the Word in the world, linked to the Eucharist, the sacrament of community."[336] Desmond continues, "Lonnie's offering of his suffering in reparation for men's indifference to Jesus' suffering reveals the youth's belief in the reality of the mystical community and the communion of saints. His expiatory action – a *real* semiotic event – emulates the action of Christ in His sacrifice and spiritual gift giving. Near the end of the novel, when Lonnie dies, Binx will also affirm this community and the belief in the resurrection of the body."[337] Desmond's conclusion is, again, appealing, and we will consider his affirmation of Percy's sacramental community more fully below. Yet, while "Jack" may long for the relationship he has with Lonnie, "Binx" still considers Sharon a "big sweet piece." And, on the ride home, Binx's MG – normally immune – "becomes infested with malaise."[338] He is as conflicted as ever following his "real" encounter with Lonnie – acutely aware of his identity crisis, and, therefore, suffering all the more.

Binx's and Kate's Failed Mutual Search for Intimacy

In addition to Lonnie, the other character whom critics are quick to point to as one whom Binx authentically interacts with is his cousin-by-marriage, Kate Cutrer. Indeed, Binx seems to have a particularly genuine concern for Kate's well being; further, they both constitute a kind of

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[335] Ibid., 165.
[336] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 54.
[337] Ibid., 55.
[338] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 166.

ironic community of alienated individuals. Desmond notes that Binx and Kate are "[b]oth maimed and self-isolated creatures, yet both are searchers. As Kate is drawn to Binx, so also is he drawn to her as the one who knows him best, one with whom he can share his deepest longings."[339] They recognize in one another their own psychological disorder; yet, while Binx detaches himself from others in such a way that his malady is hidden, Kate wears her malaise transparently for all to see, nearly committing suicide at one point. Because Kate is a kind of double of Binx's character, and given her utter transparency in contrast to Binx's hiddenness, she reveals what I take to be precisely the source of Binx's despair: autonomous freedom. In one revealing conversation with Binx, Kate is excited over a discovery made with her therapist, Merle: "I had discovered that a person does not have to *be* this or *be* that or be anything, not even oneself. One is free."[340] Kate's transparency reveals a vacuous freedom which amounts to nothingness, for, as we discovered in chapter one, a self must essentially become something, or, take on content via relational commitments. To avoid these relational commitments out of a misunderstanding of freedom is to allow the self to disintegrate into nothingness. And Kate's transparent proclamation also reveals Binx's problem: to concreteize his existence in the real world seems to him inextricable from the blind societal conformity he sees around him – most particularly in his Aunt Emily. In a final effort to solve their mutual search and alleviate their mutual despair, Binx and Kate attempt to consummate their alienated community of two in a kind of inverted marriage.

Kate travels with Binx to Chicago, and, after some seductive overtures, Kate comes on to him in hopes that these two alienated individuals – who at least share the intimacy of understanding one another's predicament – might transcend their mutual malaise in one fell

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[339] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 63.
[340] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 114.

sexual swoop. In one often-quoted passage toward the end of the novel, Binx confesses the catastrophic results:

> We did very badly and almost did not do at all. Flesh poor flesh failed us. The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit (for despising is not the worst fate to overtake the flesh), but until this moment seen through and canceled, rendered null by the cold and fishy eye of the malaise – flesh poor flesh now at this moment summoned all at once to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope – quails and fails. The truth is I was frightened half to death by her bold . . . carrying on. I reckon I am used to my blushing little Lindas from Gentilly. Kate too was scared. We shook like leaves. . . . Christians talk about the horror of sin, but they have overlooked something. They keep talking as if everyone were a great sinner, when the truth is that nowadays one is hardly up to it. There is very little sin in the depths of the malaise. The highest moment of a malaisian's life can be that moment when he manages to sin like a proper human.[341]

The passage, as various critics have noted, is certainly intended to mark a turning point in the novel for Binx's search. His search for objective meaning has failed him yet again – this time in his and Kate's botched attempt at sexual intimacy. Kobre points out a significant change in Binx's microdialogue in the passage: "Of course what strikes us first in this passage is the presence of a new voice within his microdialogue, for Binx – the skeptic, the searcher – now speaks in a religious voice. There is a penitential sound to his refrain 'flesh poor flesh,' and the

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[341] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 200.

long second sentence, with its liturgical rhythms, reads like a prayer."[342] Kobre concludes that

the change indicates an indirect communication by which Binx discovers meaning via a failed

bond.[343] Desmond essentially identifies this failed bond as Percy's illustration of the Cartesian

dissociation of spirit-in-flesh – the spirit-in-flesh which is ultimately a reality signaled by the

Incarnation and the Eucharist.[344] And Desmond, in a move similar to Kobre's assertion that Binx

has an indirect recognition of meaning by recognizing a failed bond, refers to Binx's and Kate's

trip to Chicago as a "beneficent catastrophe that eventually brings him to a decisive point in his

search."[345] What is significant about these common critical approaches to this climactic scene in

The Moviegoer is the implication that Binx undergoes a significantly positive change via a

negative moment. The problem, however, is that although the idea of a positive change via a

negative moment may seem profoundly Christological, one is left to wonder who between Binx

or Kate is the Christ-figure. Yet, returning to Austin's terms, the inverted marriage between Binx

and Kate is not "happy," because there is no commitment involved in the consummation of their

alienated presences. Without commitment, their relationship cannot sustain itself when the

momentarily transcendent high of sexual intimacy brings them back to their crushing existence

of despair. Binx and Kate's sexual meeting is meaningless because it is annulled by the absence

of the speech-act, "I Do," and by the absence of God and priest to bind them authoritatively. The

dissolution between word and world in their act – the unhappiness of the consummation – is, for

Percy, a sacramental sign to Binx on his search. This negative moment – the failure of an

inverted marriage between alienated protagonists – foreshadows Percy's comedic epilogue.

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[342] Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 72.
[343] Ibid., 72.
[344] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 69.
[345] Ibid., 71.

Faithful Community or Autonomous Ethics?: Further Consideration

One source of critical contention is over whether the ending to Binx's narrative signals merely an ethical change or a religious change, and, whether Percy's ending remains individualistic in its Kierkegaardian devotion. Toward the end of the novel, just when Binx is ready to fatalistically "fall prey to desire,"[346] he decides, rather haphazardly, that he will make Kate his fiancé. Binx first reveals the decision in the midst of simultaneously rejecting the opportunity for more esthetic play with Sharon and her friend, Joyce. On Ash Wednesday, we find that Binx and Kate, together, have plans to marry, albeit rather flimsy plans. Binx asks Kate if she has informed Aunt Emily of their plans:

> 'Did you tell her?' I ask.
>
> 'I told her we are to be married.'
>
> 'Are we?'
>
> 'Yes.'

Their mutual plans for a more solidified identity – consecrated in the speech-act of marriage – still lacks commitment as evidenced by the constant need for reassurance. Yet again, Kate asks Binx what he plans to do, and he responds with a shrug and says to himself, "There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons."[347] Though Binx is committed to the intimacy of listening to people, his solution to the problem of alienation seems rather arbitrary. In yet another signal that Binx has resigned himself to ethical commitments, he reveals his intention to attend medical school if his Aunt Emily wishes him to. Despite Binx's newfound resignation to choose commitment, we discover that his eventual

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[346] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 226.
[347] Ibid., 233.

marriage to Kate will not be easy. She warns Binx that she is "frightened when [she] is alone and [she] is frightened when [she] is with people" and that Binx will "have to be with [her] a great deal."[348] Again, though Binx and Kate appear ready to commit to one another, their continued unbelief seems unsupported by a larger community and, thus, set up for failure. If two alienated individuals become one, they cannot embody the orthodox analogue of the relationship between Christ and Church unless they are both supported and constituted by the communal relationship between Christ and the Church body. Whether or not any significant change has occurred seems, at this point, too impossible to say.

Yet, Percy did not choose to end his novel in such open-ended ambiguity. Instead, to begin the Epilogue, Binx reveals, "In June Kate and I were married."[349] In the year which has passed, Binx has begun graduate school, he and Kate have settled into a home, and Aunt Emily has become fond of Binx. In committing himself to Kate and to medical school, Binx has not only reconciled himself to his ethically-minded Aunt, but he appears to have given himself a meaningful existence. This is perhaps most signified by the fact that Binx's alienated, onanistic monologues have transitioned to intimate conversations, and, finally, the "happy" speech-act of marriage to Kate. Yet, the question remains as to whether Binx has realized his need for faith in God to sustain his ethical commitments: is he Kierkegaard's ethicist or the knight of faith? Or, in step with the central conflict of the novel, has Binx merely conformed to Aunt Emily's moralizing, or has he, via faith in God, resolved the tension between meaningless individualism and empty conformity to society? Martin Luschei concludes that Binx takes the leap and becomes "the knight of faith," which he takes to be evidenced by Binx's willingness to marry Kate in spite of – and fully aware of – her frightening psychological problems and unlikelihood

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[348] Ibid., 234.
[349] Ibid., 236.

to change.[350] Kobre agrees with Luschei, but adds that Binx's salvation happens on Percy's dialogical terms – through the conversations and voices that propel the novel's narrative.[351] Kobre adds that Binx's commitment to Kate in marriage and decision to attend medical school does not signal an aquiescence to Aunt Emily's moralizing: "[T]he language in which he expresses his decision has no trace of the aristocratic 'obligations' of which Emily speaks. Rather, Binx's vision of service, 'to hand [others] along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along,' is one of fellowship and interdependence."[352] In what is perhaps his most compelling argument, Kobre argues that Binx's search has transitioned from a focus on "observable phenomenon" to "the more elusive spiritual realm," and this also signals a change in his relation to the people around him as evidenced in the very last line of the Epilogue where he does not refer to the children as his half-brothers and half-sisters, but as his brothers and sisters:

> With a shift of a word, the nascent religious voice that we heard earlier at last takes precedence in his microdialogue. For by omitting a simple adjective, Binx quietly declares that his relation to these children is no longer so tenuous, so provisional. And, by extension, perhaps, he also embraces his other brothers and sisters: the sad, fractious family of humanity. Where once he fixed his sight on the distance between himself and others, now he sees the web of creation that binds them.[353]

While Luschei's proclamation of Binx as Kierkegaard's knight of faith and Kobre's affirmation of this transition of faith through Percy's use of sacramental-dialogue is compelling, Sykes and Desmond make important qualifications in their mostly similar affirmations.

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[350] Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, 106.
[351] Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices*, 76.
[352] Ibid., 76.
[353] Ibid., 79-80.

Sykes and Desmond offer important qualifications for us to consider in their affirmations of Percy's conversational and marital form of redemption. Sykes – contra Luschei[354] – argues that Binx "is never able to adopt Lonnie's unselfconscious directness, his actions indicate an inward amendment."[355] In terms of his newfound faith, Binx's conversion remains almost wholly inward. That is, Sykes's point seems to intimate another one he makes about Percy's devotion to Kierkegaard in general:

> The chief theological difficulty comes with . . . the quest of the alienated self for authenticity. . . . In more directly theological matters, Percy's attachment to Kierkegaard seems to have inclined him to a notion of grace that is private and decisionistic[.] . . . Percy, like Kierkegaard, is hoping to lead the reader to the point where he will decide to change the orientation of his life. But an orientation dependent upon one's private decision is always reversible. . . . From Binx Bolling to Tom More, they carom through life with varying degrees of distractedness, dislocation, and outright mental pathology. Any decision they make seems temporary, which in turn makes their relationships to the church tenuous and secondary.[356]

Percy, in his commitments to Kierkegaard, may have depicted redemptions which are still excessively committed to subjectivity. Sykes's contention regarding the weakness of the will seems telling in relation to Desmond's affirming conclusion: "Does Binx's anticipated 'new life' signify a kind of conversion? Percy establishes this, semiotically, as a *possibility*. Certainly Binx's earlier life of romantic role playing suggests a self-indulgent indifference to the ideal of

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[354] "All [Binx's] flippancy is gone. There is no trace of self-consciousness, and much is left unsaid." Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, 110.
[355] Sykes, *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, 128.
[356] Ibid., 164.

love, of suffering with others, and of a life lived in charity with another within the human community."[357] Perhaps the open-ended possibility is more directly tied to the tenuous nature of Binx's decisions than to Percy's remaining "faithful to the mystery."[358] So while Percy should be lauded for the intersubjectivity he attempts to affirm, for instance, in Binx's relationship with Lonnie, he, according to Sykes, ultimately leaves "the Cartesian ego its autonomy and its emptiness. . . . Regardless of the necessity of some other and some community for my self-consciousness, I can never be bound to any particular person or group except by my choice. To say otherwise would be to cancel out the freedom and mystery of the self upon which Percy has staked so much."[359] Without larger communities – particularly the church body – Binx and Kate ultimately place faith in their own ability to sustain their commitments. Though Binx and Kate have learned that marriage is not a negation of freedom and selfhood, it seems they are still reticent to allow themselves to become one in the directing revelation of Christ – a mysterious intimacy which seems both more distinctly mysterious and intimate from the kind of "intersubjectivity" Percy affirms and Binx and Lonnie demonstrate. And this lasting reticence – coupled with the weakness of the will's private decisions – seems ultimately instigated by their missing relationship to the body of Christ as manifested in the church community.

Ultimately, it seems that Percy remains too committed to subjectivity; conscious awareness of despair and the subsequent detached search for objective meaning seems inadequate to the conversion Percy's protagonists must make. Or, to return to the epigraph of the novel, that Binx is gradually becoming more aware of his despair is itself considered somewhat redemptive. And, Wood who has also noted this point, comments that this seemingly salvific

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[357] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 78.
[358] Ibid., 78.
[359] John Sykes, "The Imperious Castaway: Walker Percy on Guilt and the Self," *Religion and Literature* 27.3 (Autumn 1995): 65-6.

conversion to a kind of passionate self-awareness is "always in solitude."[360] Yet, while Sykes

and Wood highlight the potential Kierkegaardian shortcomings of Percy's affirmations of

community, I would argue in addition to their points that Percy's notion of intersubjectivity as a

kind of sacramental "real presence" is also problematic, and, though similar, significantly

different from James Davison Hunter's notion of "faithful presence" put forth in chapter 3. First,

as mentioned above, it seems evident that Binx's relationship to Lonnie is intended to be both

uniquely sacramental and conversational in a way that ultimately bears fruit in Binx's new life.

Above, we saw Desmond refer to Lonnie as "a living sign of the reality of the Word in the world,

linked to the Eucharist, the sacrament of community."[361] Further, we noted a unique exchange

between Binx and Lonnie at the movies that seemed to exemplify a kind of mystical

intersubjectivity: "A good night: Lonnie happy (he looks around at me with the liveliest sense of

the secret between us; the secret is that Sharon is not and never will be onto the little touches we

see in the movie and, in the seeing, know that the other sees."[362] This type of knowing

relationship seems to be what Percy affirms in his modest corrective of Kierkegaard. Yet, upon

further examination, this sacramental form of intersubjectivity seems problematic as a

mysterious aspect of redemption for two primary reasons.

The Problem of Percy's Sacramental Intersubjectivity

That Percy's concept of intersubjectivity as sacramental real presence is problematic is

evident if we consider further the interaction between Binx and Lonnie. Their interaction, while

uniquely human, is ultimately also universally – objectively, we might say – human. It is indeed

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[360] Wood, "The Alienated Self and the Absent Community in the Work of Walker Percy," 364.
[361] Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, 54.
[362] Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 143.

what Wood referred to Percy's approach to language – a "natural theology." And this would suit

Percy, who, as we noted via Sykes in chapter 3, sought to establish a kind of objective proof for

Christianity and saw language and sacramental theology together as the key to this proof. That is,

there is a sense in which Percy intends for this intersubjectivity between Binx and Lonnie to be a

mysterious form God's grace – not unlike O'Connor's more grotesque transfigurations of nature

– which, due to the signs implicit in the natural interactions of their real presences, is ultimately

most effective in prodding Binx toward redemption and away from alienation. What is

interesting, however, is that Binx's relationship with Lonnie does not involve any direct

conversation regarding what directly plagues Binx, nor does it involve any sense of forgiveness

despite its tremendous influence on Binx as an incitement to his reconciliation with God,

himself, and others. In other words, the description of a natural theology is telling in that it is not

a *specific revelation*. Indeed, even the key scene of intersubjectivity – their interaction at the

movie – features them focused on a movie together rather than in directly revealing encounter

with one another. Secondly, it seems this intersubjectivity enables Percy to retain the excessively

Kierkegaardian subjectivity that Sykes and Wood refer to. That is, while Binx and Kate, newly

married, seem to have also achieved the kind of intersubjectivity Binx and Lonnie have, they

ultimately remain sovereign and searching – ever shaky in the willfulness of their decisions.

Wood's assertion seems both relevant to the point and pointed in its conclusion: "Although [Binx

and Kate] have come *to* themselves, they have not yet been delivered *from* themselves."[363]

Perhaps the underlying reliance on human reason in Percy's sacramental-semiological

reconciliation between word and world is ultimately what undermines Binx's ethical decisions in

the end of the novel. The marital relationship is intended to be communal in such a way that goes

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[363] Wood, "The Alienated Self and the Absent Community in the Work of Walker Percy," 376.

beyond mere intersubjectivity: two becoming one retains two persons, but certainly means more than just two spiritual subjects interacting. Further, the relationship which marriage signifies – the relationship between Christ and the Church – also involves a two-becoming-one intercourse which requires faith that transcends reason, while also imparting more direct forms of grace, mercy, and forgiveness than the indirect religiousness that Lonnie sacramentally imparts to Binx. Again, the difference in emphasis on the Incarnation between Percy and Hunter is compelling: for Percy – and O'Connor – the emphasis is excessively concerned with God's mysterious presence in nature and the grace this imparts. However, for Hunter, as we noted in chapter 3, the Incarnation's emphasis is distinctly about faith in direct, reconciliatory agentic action: "In the most momentous event in history, God became incarnate in Christ not only to model shalom (by forgiving the sinner, feeding the hungry, healing the sick and infirm, raising the dead, losing the outsider, and caring for all in need) but, as St. Paul writes, to be 'our shalom.'"[364] Percy's real presences are, rather ironically, both too reasonable and too indirect. The actions of Christ while on earth – and of God in Christ toward men universally – are directly reconciliatory and not merely intersubjective, but constitutionally relational. That is, humans, by faith, find their identities *mysteriously in Christ* and not merely *in their interactions with Christ*. And, further, Christ's directly relational actions happen through his church community which *is his body* – or, are constituted by his very presence.

Conclusion

In his undying affirmation both of a Kierkegaardian critique of atheistic autonomy and of intersubjectivity based on the uniqueness of human language, Walker Percy provides a

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[364] James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford U P, 2010), 229.

compelling and enjoyable narrative that juxtaposes onanistic desire and marriage; alienated monologue and intimate conversation; and, in doing so, offers a compelling synthesis of meaning between word and world, infused with the intimacy of recognition. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, Percy's call for a realistic, sacramental-semiology remains too reliant on natural theology to produce significant, knowable, and lasting redemption; further, his call for intersubjectivity, while important, seems to diminish the faithful, mysterious, and constitutional relationship between Christ and church. Ultimately, the Incarnation of God in Christ is not primarily about God's embodiment in nature, but, more to the point, is about his divine speech-act to man – the divine 'I Do.'

Part 2, Chapter 6

The Seducer's Self-destructive Family: Rabbit's Run into the Arms of a Prostitute and the

Dissatisfaction with Creatureliness in Updike's Novel

Introduction

There is little doubt that the dominating motif in John Updike's fiction is sexuality. While

the explicit sexual depictions in Updike's fiction are often off-putting for critics and readers,

what is often misunderstood is that Updike, following Søren Kierkegaard, understood man's

erotic strivings, in part, as his struggle to transcend the limitations of his existence. The other

often disconcerting element in Updike's fiction is his seemingly overly sympathetic tone toward

the pervasive darkness that his protagonists persist in. As critics have pointed out, Updike's

depictions, particularly in his early novels, often served, however unwittingly, to illuminate the

Barthian "shadow side" of God's creation[365] – the dialectical shadow of night, sorrow, finitude,

and need which is cast by the light of God's eternal, creative goodness. Updike's 1960 novel,

Rabbit, Run, is illustrative of two primary themes: the early influences of Updike's

Kierkegaardian and Barthian Protestantism, and the dominant theme of unrestrained sexual

desire as constitutive of a kind of freedom. Continuing with our theme of the autonomous ego's

onanistic manipulation of others to the detriment of community life – one of the most necessary

sources of selfhood, we could aptly consider Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom as Kierkegaard's esthetic

Seducer. Rabbit's radically autonomous freedom is construed as synonymous with the

unmitigated pursuit of desire fulfillment; yet, the erotic form of transcendence he pursues

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[365] Karl Barth comments extensively on the shadow side of God in Volume III of his *Church Dogmatics*. George W. Hunt has most extensively commented on the Barthian relationship between God's Creative purposes and evil-as-nothingness, and its dialectical impact on Updike's works. I will interact more with his work and Barth's "shadow side" below.

produces only vacuous freedom and its attendant evils – nothingness. Rabbit runs from the

ethical obligations of his family to Ruth, a prostitute, and attempts to refasion his drab

circumstances with her into an ideal sense of family on his onanistic terms; yet, a family

constituted by his unrestrained, egoistic desire produces the anti-creative waste and death which

characterizes Barthian nothingness.

Basketball as Illustration of Theme

Rabbit, Run opens with a scene fit for cinema, and the basketball theme it initiates is

worthy of consideration for our topic, because of the self-other dynamics associated with player

and team. The scene integrates the basketball motif with an introduction of its protagonist:

> Boys are playing basketball around a telephone pole with a backboard bolted to it.
>
> Legs, shouts. The scrape and snap of Keds on loose alley pebbles seems to
>
> catapult their voices high into the moist March air blue above the wires. Rabbit
>
> Angstrom, coming up the alley in a business suit, stops and watches, though he's
>
> twenty-six and six three. So tall, he seems an unlikely rabbit, but the breadth of
>
> white face, the pallor of his blue irises, and a nervous flutter under his brief nose
>
> as he stabs a cigarette into his mouth partially explain the nickname, which was
>
> given to him when he too was a boy.[366]

Rabbit is a 26 year old fledgling businessman beset with nervousness and desirous to return to

his high school glory days. Rabbit joins the boys in their game, but they do not dare utter

competitive banter at their elder; yet, Rabbit almost resents this: "He doesn't want this respect,

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[366] John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, *Rabbit Angstrom: A Tetralogy* (New York: Everyman's Library, 1995), 5.

he wants to tell them there's nothing to getting old, it takes nothing."[367] Updike's anti-saint

seems acutely aware that as he gets older, idealistic dreams are not realized; rather, death inches

closer and life's seeming nothingness sets in evermore. Seeking to transcend this growing

awareness, Rabbit joins the boys, and seems at first to return to the days when he was "famous

through the country" for his basketball playing, but he is quickly reminded of his deteriorating

nature: "He feels liberated from long gloom. But his body is weighty and his breath grows short.

It annoys him, that he gets winded."[368] The "liberation from long gloom" which Rabbit seeks is

an early signal of his essential predicament: he feels the constraining, finite burden of growing

old and the equally constraining ethical burden of being a husband and father to a less-than-ideal

family. Rabbit works a dissatisfying job to support a wife who is a depressive alcoholic. And,

eight years removed from high school glory, Rabbit is disillusioned, given his status as a prior

center-of-attention star player for the basketball team. The present circumstances of Rabbit's life

weigh on him like a sexual burden that is building to release.

Joyce B. Markle has provided the most compelling and extensive analysis of basketball

imagery in *Rabbit, Run*, and noting two of her main points is a helpful segue to considering

Rabbit's free-running autonomous desire. The first essential point which Markle makes is that

the basketball motif provides sexual imagery in the novel:

> The circular hole of the basket is the goal, above the heads of the players and
>
> bathed in light. The net surrounds the hole, catching at the ball when it slips
>
> through. Net or mesh is also used to trap or cage rabbits, so the images of nets in
>
> the novel become associated with threats to Rabbit's freedom or those things
>
> which are *not* the goals, which interfere with the goal. Basketball and sex are

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[367] Ibid., 6.
[368] Ibid., 7.

associated, first through the obvious image of the circle or hole, a female symbol;

Rabbit describes the basket as 'the high perfect hole with its pretty skirt of net.'

The rim becomes a 'crotch.' The net makes 'a lady-like whisper.' . . .

Basketball and sex are also associated specifically by Rabbit when he

recalls Mary Ann, the girl he made love to after basketball games.[369]

Women are goals for Rabbit to score, and, in high school, he did plenty of "scoring" on and off

the court. Yet, in all of this self-satisfying scoring, there is a distinct connection between

Rabbit's teammates and the women who are his sexual exploits: he is the star of the show, and it

is more about him than the others. The relationship between Rabbit and his former basketball

teammates is the second essential point that Markle makes regarding basketball as a motif in the

novel:

[A human oriented] society has no provision for star players; it demands only

'team players.' In his basketball days, Rabbit was a star player – 'Showboat' the

man in the crowd called him. He was the shooter, the point-maker. He did not

work well with other players, as former team-mate Harrison explains in the bar

when he quotes Tothero as saying, 'This is in confidence, Ronnie, but I depend on

you to spark the team. Harry is not a team player.'

The star player and the team players are necessary to each other; and

because of his point-making potential the star player is allowed his independence

and a certain degree of selfishness.[370]

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[369] Joyce B. Markle, *Fighters and Lovers: Theme in the Novels of John Updike* (New York: New York U P, 1973), 43.

[370] Ibid., 47. Markle's assertion that our society desires team-oriented players as opposed to showboats or stars seems tellingly outdated. One could argue that, beginning in the late 1980's and early '90's, America's desire for ultra competitiveness, survival of the fittest, and individual

In her discussion of basketball imagery, Markle has provided us with the essential connection we want to explore: the unrestrained, egoistic desire for self-transcendence which is often associated with sex, and the destructive consequences this unrestrained desire breeds between self and other. During high school basketball, Rabbit could afford to get away with the selfishness that being the star of the team afforded him; while at times off-putting to his teammates, Rabbit's self-exaltation did not prevent the achievement of mutual goals. However, the more serious ethical implications involved in family life and sexuality expose the socially-problematic nature of the independent freedom Rabbit was afforded on the basketball court.

Rabbit's Run from Ethical Obligations in his Automobile

The reasons for Rabbit's eventual running are most prevalently related to the difficult obligations imposed on him by his family, though his past decisions are certainly implicated in his family's current difficulties. Rabbit's marriage to Janice is the product of a shotgun wedding which occurred when "he was twenty-three and she was two years out of high school."[371] His glory days from high school faded into history, and the transcendence of Rabbit's high school stardom was quickly brought back down to earth. Rabbit has a son, Nelson, and another child on the way, but Janice's pregnancy seems to interfere with Rabbit's sexual desire in a way that is telling: "She stands up and her pregnancy infuriates him with its look of stubborn lumpiness."[372] Even his wife's growing stomach is perceived as an impingement upon his sexual desire. Rabbit returns home from playing basketball with the boys to find his wife tipsy-drunk, with the car at

domination began to grow exponentially. And with a growing number of sports athlete sex-scandals, our society seems to exalt the Rabbits until the familial-fidelity implications of their behavior comes to the fore – then we devour the inauthentic, hypocritical monster which, in part, we have created.

[371] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 11.

[372] Ibid., 11.

one grandparents' and Nelson, their son, at the others' – and Janice's depressive irresponsibility only further ails his already aching dissatisfaction with bourgeois life. When Rabbit needs a way out, he opts for that mode of transportation which, as we saw in chapter two, has so enabled Americans' unmitigated pursuit for personal fulfillment and independence: the automobile.

Rabbit's initial run from his family is particularly compelling for our purposes, because he takes off in his automobile – that accessory to Americans' autonomous desire we also saw prominently used in O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Percy's *The Moviegoer*. It is common knowledge that Updike once revealed that *Rabbit, Run* was intended as a kind of response to Jack Kerouac's 1957 novel *On The Road*: "[W]ithout reading it, I resented its apparent instruction to cut loose; *Rabbit, Run* was meant to be a realistic demonstration of what happens when a young American family man goes on the road – the people left behind get hurt."[373] Once Rabbit has hit the road of freedom, Rabbit, despite his attempts to push away the feelings of guilt with thoughts of basketball, cannot do so:

> His mind nervously shifts away from the involuntary vision of Janice's meal sizzling in the pan, chops probably, the grease-tinted water bubbling disconsolately, the unfrozen peas steaming away their vitamins. He tries to think of something pleasant. He imagines himself about to shoot a long one-hander; but he feels he's on a cliff, there is an abyss he will fall into when the ball leaves his hands. He tries to repicture his mother and sister feeding his son, but the boy is crying in backward vision, his forehead red and his mouth stretched wide and his helpless breath hot.[374]

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[373] John Updike, "Updike's Rabbit," Penguin Classics: Features, http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/shared/WebDisplay/0,,214908_1_0,00.html

[374] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 23.

Rabbit's sudden visions of the ethical commitments he is leaving behind – despite his attempts to

evade these visions with self-authenticating thoughts of basketball playing – provide the earliest

assertion that his radical autonomy pushes him to the "abyss" of nothingness. Updike's claim to

be taking a pointed stance against Keruoacian free-wheeling is perhaps nowhere more telling

than when Rabbit, having "driven forty miles to get sixteen miles away,"[375] stops to ask for

directions. In a move that reveals Updike's love for name-symbolism, Rabbit discovers that if he

goes straight, he will end up in "Churchtown," then "New Holland"[376] – a small town in

Pennsylvania which originally meant "New Design." Rabbit's response to a potential trip to

Church and a New Design is the desire to go somewhere else:

> 'Do you have any maps?'
>
> 'Son, where do you want to go?'
>
> 'Huh? I don't know exactly.'
>
> 'Where are you headed?' The man is patient. . . . For the first time, Harry
>
> realizes he is a criminal.[377]

Rabbit's self-directing freedom is incoherent; he has no sense of what direction he is running

when dumping his family for a new life. Updike does not allow his character the luxury of

uncomplicated escape; instead, he exposes Rabbit's concept of freedom for what it really is:

enslavement to personal desire to the destruction of both self and other. Ronald Primeau gets it

right when he says that Updike's *Rabbit, Run* uses the automobile to question the American

Dream:

> Rabbit's dreams of freedom are derived from what he has read and heard about

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375 Ibid., 25.
376 Ibid., 25.
377 Ibid., 25.

the American quest. . . . Rabbit's anger and frustration, however, soon overwhelm his short-lived hopes for escape. The more he drives, the more surroundings bring back the same painful memories and associations. . . .

For Rabbit, the road becomes a hostile force and a barrier to his escape. He, therefore, becomes obsessed with maps, though he can't read them in the dark and can't remember where he's been. Struggling to make out the names of towns and rivers, he sees the map as a net of intersecting red and blue lines forming a maze in which he is trapped. What had been for Kerouac straight and fast stretches inviting power, speed, and energizing continent-crossing was for Rabbit only another trap.[378]

The problematic nature of Rabbit's freedom is reinforced when, at another stop, Rabbit is slightly reprimanded by a farmer, who, no doubt, represents an earthly ideal which modern man has lost. He reminds Rabbit that "[t]he only way to get somewhere, you know, is to figure out where you're going before you go there," but Rabbit quickly responds, "I don't think so."[379] Later, in a symbolic fit of anger, Rabbit destroys his map and "blames everything on that farmer with glasses and two shirts. Funny how the man sticks in his throat. He can't think past him, his smugness, his *solidity*."[380] The farmer's solid sense of self – his ethical orientation – bothers Rabbit. Later, after Rabbit has returned the car to Janice for her to use, the reverend Jack Eccles pointedly criticizes him asking, "Why? Don't you need it, to explore your freedom in?" To which Rabbit admits, "[I]t didn't do me any good."[381] Ironically, Rabbit's drive from home leads

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[378] Ronald Primeau, *Romance of the Road: The Literature of the American Highway* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State U Popular P, 1996), 89-91.
[379] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 26.
[380] Ibid., 33.
[381] Ibid., 91.

him right back to Mount Judge, Pennsylvania – where he can still run freely from his family, but is forced to witness the consequences of the solipsistic family he attempts to create.[382]

Rabbit as Kierkegaard's Seducer: The Esthetic Re-creation of Family with a Prostitute

Before considering Rabbit's re-creation of his situation with Ruth into a sense of family, it is helpful to return one final time to our analysis in chapter one of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* – particularly as it relates to the characteristics of the Seducer. Of course, as mentioned above, the personified manifestation of the esthetic sphere is characterized by one's living according to the immediacy of desire. Thus, one particular passage, as it relates to familial obligation and solidity, is telling for both "A" and the Seducer which may or may not be "A" himself:

> They do say that marriage partners become one, but this is very obscure and mysterious talk. If an individual is many, he has lost his freedom and cannot order his riding boots when he wishes, cannot knock about according to whim. If he has a wife, it is difficult; if he has a wife and perhaps children, it is formidable; if he has a wife and children, it is impossible.[383]

The fact that personal freedom seems to get smothered by familial obligations is depressing to "A" to the extent that he, much like Rabbit, wishes to avoid them. However, his lack of commitments seems also to undergird his depression: "[T]he only thing I see is emptiness, the only thing I live on is emptiness, the only thing I move in is emptiness."[384] However, what is unique to the Seducer is the qualification of reflectiveness. Unlike the more immediate esthete,

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[382] It's important to note that while Rabbit is "creating" what he desires, he is "recreating" the meaning he desires out of given circumstances; and, in a broader sense, he is attempting to recreate something new out of the givenness of his nature as a creature.

[383] Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or Part I* ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1987), 297.

[384] Ibid., 37.

the Seducer is more concerned with "the subtlety, the cunning, whereby he knows how to steal into a girl's heart, the dominion he knows how to gain over it, the enthralling, deliberate, progressive seduction. How many he has seduced is of no importance here; what occupies us is the artistry, the meticulousness, the profound cunning with which he seduces."[385] Much like the more immediate esthete, the Seducer perceives a potential commitment to a woman as a constraint on his freedom, and seeks to invert the relationship so that the woman is objectified as a means to the end of his personal pleasure. However, while the more immediate esthete enjoys the pleasure itself, the more reflective Seducer enjoys his own enjoyment. He enjoys the excitement of artistically recreating his immediate circumstances to his own liking. He, the artist, attempts to fashion circumstances into a situation – a work of art – to be enjoyed. That the Seducer's extreme form of freedom aimed to manipulate circumstances resembles that of an asocial god is most telling when he says, "I have always tried to develop the beautiful Greek αὐτάρκεια (self-sufficiency), and especially to make a pastor superfluous."[386] The implications for any relationship with a woman are, ultimately, disastrous, for the relationship becomes onanistic in the sense that the woman becomes an object of manipulation – a means to the end of his pleasure. The onanistic imagery is perhaps most apparent when the Seducer proclaims, "My relationship to her is like a dance that is supposed to be danced by two people but is danced by only one. That is, I am the other dancer, but invisible."[387] Rabbit's eventual relationship with Ruth, a prostitute, seems not unlike much of these descriptions. He manipulates Ruth to fulfill his sexual desires, and attempts to recreate the situation's circumstances so as to seem familial; that is, Rabbit attempts to create a family in his own solipsistic image.

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[385] Ibid., 107-8.
[386] Ibid., 415.
[387] Ibid., 380.

Rabbit seems to have some of the same tendencies as Kierkegaard's Seducer. That his family is an impingement on his freedom is made explicitly transparent: "For in the vast blank of his freedom there remain a few imperfections: his wife, their apartment, their child – clots of concern."[388] Thus, when he returns to town from his short-lived time on the road, Rabbit bunks up with his former high school basketball coach and soon finds himself on a bit of a double date with the coach and two women – one of whom is the prostitute Ruth Leonard. While there is some subtle flirting between Rabbit and Ruth, the weight of his decisions are always at the forefront of his mind. At one point, Ruth questions him, "What's this about you being married?" Rabbit responds, "'Well, I was. Still am.' He regrets that they have started talking about it. A big bubble, the enormity of it, crowds his heart. . . . This makes it worse, picturing Janice."[389] Reminders of the family he has left behind constantly clutter Rabbit's mind so as to sharply juxtapose his real family alongside the family he is about to create with Ruth. Yet, despite his accompanying guilt, Rabbit's greater concern – certainly one that the Seducer avoids at all costs – is to avoid boredom. And, thus, when Rabbit discovers that Ruth desires to hear nothing of Janice, "[t]he bubble rolls off his chest. If it doesn't worry anybody else why should it worry him?"[390] With Janice momentarily off of his conscience, Rabbit and Ruth enter her apartment for their first unholy union.

After Rabbit has sufficiently sweet-talked Ruth in a hardened way for most of the evening – and though he will recreate their circumstances to seem more positively familial – his rapacious drives first come to the fore as soon as they enter her apartment:

> Once inside, as she reaches for the light switch, he knocks her arm down, pulls

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[388] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 45.
[389] Ibid., 60.
[390] Ibid., 61.

her around, and kisses her. It's insanity, he wants to crush her, a little gauge inside his ribs doubles and redoubles his need for pressure, just pure pressure, there is no love in it, love that glances and glides along the skin, he is unconscious of their skins, it is her heart he wants to grind into his own, to comfort her completely. By nature in such an embrace she fights back. The small moist cushion of slack willingness with which her lips had greeted his dries up and turns hard, and when she can get her head back and her hand free she fits her palm against his jaw and pushes as if she wanted to throw his skull back into the hall. Her fingers curl and a long nail scrapes the tender skin below one eye.[391]

They both settle down a bit after the initial encounter, but Rabbit remains manipulative during their sexual encounter. He demands that it fit certain criteria that seem to complement the situation he is trying to create; for instance, Rabbit desires to undress her, and he refuses to let her use any form of birth control. Ruth's response to Rabbit's manipulation of the situation is revealing: "Say, do you think we're married or something the way you boss me around?" Rabbit's initial response confirms the pseudo-familial situation he is creating: "Yes; let's be." And, shortly thereafter, Rabbit says, "Don't be in such a hurry[.] . . . You're supposed to enjoy this. This is our wedding night."[392] The irony of Rabbit's seduction is completely transparent: he is recreating the situation of a night of pleasure with a prostitute that he just met as one of the most intimate, committed, and conventional occasions of all: the wedding night. He sees her in her silver slip and thinks to himself that "[w]omen look like brides in their slips."[393] Just when Rabbit seems lost in his creative vision, his guilt clutches him yet again when Ruth tells him to

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[391] Ibid., 66.
[392] Ibid., 67-9.
[393] Ibid., 70.

pull the shade due to the "depressing view": "He goes to the window and bends to see what she means. There is only the church across the way, gray, grave, and mute. . . . He lowers the shade on it guiltily."[394] Yet, with the blinds closed to the church and rings removed from their fingers to further symbolize the inverted family Rabbit is creating, he finally "makes love to her as he would to his wife."[395]

Nothingness and the Attendant Guilt Bred By Rabbit's Family

Yet, at the conclusion of their "wedding night," it is not joy which is felt, but that gnawing guilt which Updike will not allow his anti-saint to elude: "Ruth takes her legs from around him and spills him off her body like a pile of sand. He looks in her face and seems to read in its shadows an expression of forgiveness, as if she knows that at the moment of release, the root of love, he betrayed her by feeling despair. Nature leads you up like a mother and as soon as she gets her little contribution leaves you with nothing."[396] The despair and nothingness Rabbit feels after sex with Ruth is complemented once more by the imagery of the looming church in the background: "The more awake he gets the more depressed he is. From deep in the pillow he stares at the horizontal strip of stained-glass church window that shows beneath the window shade."[397] Rabbit dozes off to sleep, and in the morning, they have sex again. Ruth gets dressed and Rabbit describes his watching her get dressed as their becoming "domesticated."[398] As if to fulfill the thought, Rabbit offers to go to the grocery store to buy food for her to fix for them. When Rabbit asks what he ought to purchase, Ruth responds, "What do you like?" When Rabbit

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[394] Ibid., 70.
[395] Ibid., 73.
[396] Ibid., 74-5.
[397] Ibid., 76-7.
[398] Ibid., 78.

leaves, he feels pleased by her submissive response in deference to his desires: "*What do you like*? He has her. He knows he has her."[399] Rabbit becomes exceedingly pleased with his new situation as Ruth submits to his manipulation. His thoughts of guilt seem to transfer to thoughts of comparison between Janice and Ruth, but quickly return again:

> When Ruth serves lunch he sees she is a better cook than Janice; she has boiled the hot dogs somehow without splitting them. With Janice, they always arrived at the table torn and twisted and tortured-looking. He and Ruth eat at a small porcelain table in the kitchen. As he touches his fork to his plate he remembers the cold feel in his dream of Janice's face dropping into his hands, and the memory spoils his first bite, makes it itself a kind of horror. Nevertheless he says 'Terrific' and gamely goes ahead and eats and does regain his appetite.[400]

With the conclusion of his first night and morning with his newly created family comprised of his demanding desire, a willing prostitute, and the absence of children, Rabbit has begun a destructive affair, and the consequences of his seductive re-creation for his actual family are set in motion.

The destruction of his scandalous "wedding night" with Ruth meets Rabbit almost immediately. He returns to his apartment to retrieve some clothes and is immediately struck by his own desertion:

> Though the apartment is empty, it is yet so full of Janice he begins to tremble; the sight of that easy chair turned to face the television attacks his knees. Nelson's broken toys on the floor derange his head; all the things inside his skull, the gray matter, the bones of his ears, the apparatus of his eyes, seem clutter clogging the

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[399] Ibid., 81.
[400] Ibid., 82.

tube of his self; his sinuses choke, with a sneeze or tears he doesn't know. The

living room smells of desertion.[401]

Rabbit's esthetic, experiential "self" cannot escape his natural reaction to the scene of desertion.

Gerry Brenner helpfully points out that Rabbit's sexual escapades and their subsequent

consequences are Updike's way of criticizing an animalistic "return to nature."[402] Yet, I would

also argue that, in a way, Rabbit's inescapable guilt-filled responses to his actions signal the fact

that his esthetic approach to existence is unnatural to normative selfhood. His "self" was not

created to abandon his family for a prostitute, then return to the deserted scene without feeling

the attendant incongruities of his essential need for commitment. That Updike, unlike Kerouac,

forces his protagonists to play witness to the consequences of their actions is essentially tied to

his refusal to allow their unmitigated "freedom" (possibility) to go unchecked by the other side

of the Kierkegaardian synthesis: necessity, or constraints that are imposed on us by the givenness

of our nature. As we saw in chapter one, Kierkegaard, via the pseudonym Anti-Climacus, says in

The Sickness unto Death that man is "a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal

and the eternal, of freedom, and necessity, in short a synthesis." And this synthesis, which

becomes self-conscious, "must either have established itself or have been established by

another."[403] Updike, who affirmed man as a creature made in God's image, would certainly have

no problem referring to Rabbit's sexual deviances as destructively self-effacing, for destruction

ultimately results in what Updike's other spiritual mentor, Karl Barth, isolates as that which is

essentially evil: nothingness. However, before considering Rabbit's nothingness, we must first

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[401] Ibid., 85.

[402] Gerry Brenner, "*Rabbit, Run*: John Updike's Criticism of the 'Return to Nature,'" *Critical Essays on John Updike* ed. William R. Macnaughton (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 91.

[403] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1980), 13-4.

consider his relationship with Reverend Jack Eccles, and how Eccles differs from the essential Barthian figure of the novel – Reverend Fritz Kruppenbach.

Updike's Two Pastoral Voices: Liberalism and the Barthian Critique

Interestingly, it is Updike's novel, among the three we have been considering, which invites its protagonist to interact with the church in a specific way; following his abandonment of family, Rabbit is accompanied and consulted by Reverend Jack Eccles. Yet, given the amount of time Eccles spends with Rabbit, Brenner's comment that Rabbit is "[d]eprived of the relief of shared responsibility provided by prescriptive values" and "compelled to evaluate his entanglements alone,"[404] seems a telling indictment of Eccles. And it is – Brenner goes on to more explicitly assert,

> Jack Eccles, the Episcopal minister, demonstrates the extreme example of ineffectual authority. . . . Eccles' failure as authority is . . . partly caused by [the] attempt to treat Rabbit as an individual needing special consideration. By piecemealing his authority in advice to individuals, he loses his larger authoritativeness and becomes an amateur psychologist, a 'meddler' according to his wife, to Rabbit[.] . . . His concern with Rabbit as an individual proceeds from his permissiveness, which Rabbit resents soon after he meets Eccles: 'He is getting slightly annoyed at the way the minister isn't bawling him out or something; he doesn't seem to know his job.'[405]

Early in the novel, Eccles is set in contrast with the more conservative, authoritative, and Lutheran minister, Kruppenbach. Referring to Eccles anonymously, Miss Arndt says, "It's not

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[404] Brenner, "*Rabbit, Run*: John Updike's Criticism of the 'Return to Nature,'" 91.
[405] Ibid., 92.

Reverend Kruppenbach," and the response is telling: "No, of course not Kruppenbach; Rabbit

knows who it is, though he doesn't know his name. The Episcopalian. The Springers were

Episcopalians, more of the old phony's social climbing, they were originally Reformeds."[406]

Hence, Kruppenbach, acting as a kind of authority whom Rabbit never encounters in the novel, is

juxtaposed with Eccles' more liberal, humanistic ministry. Indeed, upon his first encounter with

Rabbit, Eccles sounds like a psychologist when he responds to Rabbit's desire to hear how Janice

is doing by saying, "She seems much saner today."[407] Yet, not only is Eccles contrasted with

Kruppenback, but he is ultimately depicted as comparable with Rabbit. Eccles says, "Now if *I*

were to leave *my* wife . . . I'd get into a car and drive a thousand miles." His comment, which

"almost seems like advice," reaches Rabbit favorably when he, "delighted by how much they

have in common," reacts, "That's what I did!"[408] And the equation between Rabbit and Eccles is

brought full circle when Rabbit discovers that Eccles' family is not in order, either: his wife,

Lucy, generally despises Eccles for the absence of love in their marriage, and flaunts Freudian

clichés which seemingly provide a solace for her own troubled existence. Eccles is not unlike

Rabbit in that he has made the modern conversion from nature constituted by God as

authoritative to personal whim or experience, in short, from God to self; the only difference is

that Eccles deceives himself and others with his ethical cloak, but his garb is ineffectual in

leading Rabbit to redemption, for it lacks an authoritative reference point.

What is of note regarding Eccles' interactions with Rabbit is that he never appeals to

Rabbit's breaking God's authority – only to how he ought to feel sorry for Janice. Yet, without

this compelling external authority, Rabbit remains irresponsibly self-reverential: "Well I'm not

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[406] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 87.
[407] Ibid., 89.
[408] Ibid., 92.

going back to that little soppy dope no matter how sorry you feel for her. I don't know what she feels. I haven't known for years. All I know is what's inside *me*. That's all I have."[409] Later, referring to Eccles' desire for him to be transparent in conversation, Rabbit exclaims that "[t]he more he tells, the more he loses. He's safe inside his own skin, he doesn't want to come out. This guy's whole game is to get him out into the open where he can be manipulated."[410] These passages reinforce the fact that Rabbit's esthetic desires are his ultimate authority, and this is the basis for his god-like, onanistic manipulation of Ruth, and even Janice; further, it reinforces Rabbit's feeling that the responsibilities attendant to intimacy are only constricting of his desires. While Updike, like Walker Percy in his treatment of Jack "Binx" Bolling, is quick to be sympathetic to Rabbit's basic desire for transcendence, he also recognizes that Rabbit's ruthless, impeding desire leaves him *lost in the cosmos*. One day, feeling "bothered by God," Rabbit begs Ruth to hold him when he is troubled by the nagging thought of why he isn't "home."[411] Much like O'Connor and Percy, Updike clearly establishes the fact that the absence of metaphysical coherence and authority leaves us not only disconnected from the cosmos, but also, by implication, from one another. Though Eccles may be lost to the point of recognizing what both Rabbit and he are missing, he is at least capable of recognizing what ails Rabbit: "We're trying to *serve* God, not *be* God. . . . The truth is . . . you're monstrously selfish. You're a coward. You don't care about right or wrong; you worship nothing except your own worst instincts."[412] Yet, Eccles' ultimately psychological analyses render his influence on Rabbit qua "pastor" what the Seducer described as "superfluous." However, Kruppenbach, in contrast to Eccles, would not be rendered unnecessary, for he realizes that Christ is the one thing necessary.

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[409] Ibid., 93.
[410] Ibid., 108.
[411] Ibid., 99.
[412] Ibid., 115.

To understand both Updike's sympathy toward his unwieldy protagonist and his illumination of the destructive self, one must consider the dialectical theology which he apprehended from Barth. George Hunt has confirmed that Updike intended for Kruppenbach to be a Barthian figure; the Lutheran minister is "the touchstone of the novel as I intended it. His life . . . is meant to be Barth in action."[413] Eccles meets with Kruppenbach and after explaining to Kruppenbach all that has happened between Rabbit and Janice thus far, Eccles is chided by the Lutheran minister:

> Do you think this is your job, to meddle in these people's lives? I know what they teach you at seminary now: this psychology and that. But I don't agree with it. You think now your job is to be an unpaid doctor, to run around and plug up the holes and make everything smooth. I don't think that. I don't think that's your job. . . . I've listened to your story but I wasn't listening to what it said about the people, I was listening to what it said about you. What I heard was this: the story of a minister of God selling his message for a few scraps of gossip and a few games of golf. What do you think now it looks like to God, one childish husband leaving one childish wife? Do you ever think any more what God sees? Or have you grown beyond that? . . . It seems to you our role is to be cops, cops without handcuffs, without guns, without anything but our human good nature.[414]

Kruppenbach's initial chastisement of Eccles reveals his appeal to authority – both explicitly in his reverence for God and implicitly in his authoritative tone. Yet, the distinctly Barthian nature of the minister comes to the fore when Kruppenbach admonishes Eccles to quit with his psycho-

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[413] George W. Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things: Sex, Religion, and Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 43.
[414] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 146.

analytical meddling and get on his knees in prayer: "There is your role: to make yourself an

example of faith. . . . Yes, you suffer, but you must *love* your pain, since it is *Christ's* pain. When

on Sunday morning then, we must walk up not worn out with misery but full of Christ, *hot* with

Christ, on *fire*: burn them with the force of our belief. . . . There is nothing but Christ for us. All

the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil's work."[415] Here, we see the

dialectical contrast between the goodness in Christ and the evil in Nothing. Further, suffering can

come from God and not necessarily be evil. Yet, where Updike's particular ambiguity comes in

is in his Barthian view of Christ's death on the cross. Hunt comments that Kruppenbach, like

Barth, emphasizes a picture of Christ that is "rooted in a positive vision of the world. Just as man

is elected in the Man Jesus, so too the reprobation that man deserves falls on Jesus. This, for

Kruppenbach-Barth, is *the* meaning of the Cross in that Christ has borne condemnation for us all;

on the Cross Christ encountered the powers of Nothingness and overcame them."[416] Of course,

Christ may have ultimately overcome the powers of nothingness, but unredeemed humans

remain powerful agents of nothingness in the world, and in the worlds Updike creates, Christ's

overcoming of nothingness seems to have minimal redemptive effect on his characters. The

problem for Rabbit, whom Ralph Wood has referred to as Updike's "ambiguous pilgrim,"[417] is

that no matter how far he desires to run from dull, animalistic conformity, his passionate, esthetic

creations ironically produce evil and death.

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[415] Ibid., 147.

[416] Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things*, 44.

[417] Ralph C. Wood, "Rabbit Angstrom: John Updike's Ambiguous Pilgrim," *Rabbit Tales: Poetry and Politics in John Updike's Rabbit Novels*, ed. Lawrence R. Broer (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998), 129-49.

Barthian Nothingness and the Waste Rabbit's Onanistic Behavior Produces

Though Rabbit is searching for something – some transcendence to propel his life into a

meaningfulness which is uncorrupted by evil and dour everydayness – his search produces only

nothingness. His attempts to elude the void ironically push him and the people whom he

encounters further into nothingness. As Wood puts it, Rabbit "*thrives* amidst the metaphysical

void."[418] This incessant indulgence in nothingness has intriguing implications for our

consideration of Rabbit's egocentric family with Ruth. That Ruth has "married" herself to

precisely this agent of nothingness is made apparent when she refers to Rabbit's uniqueness

among her clientele: "But *this* one. What a nut. . . . [W]hen they're good together she feels like

next to nothing with him and that must be it, that must be what she was looking for. To feel like

next to nothing with a man."[419] The subtle play on words seems implicitly to make the point:

with Rabbit, Ruth is conjoined to nothing. Later, in a more familiar passage, Ruth recognizes

who she has committed herself to: "I see you very clear all of a sudden. You're Mr. Death

himself. You're not just nothing, you're worse than nothing. . . . You just wander around with

the kiss of death."[420] Additionally, when referring to Barth's description of evil as the powers of

nothingness, Hunt explains Rabbit's plight: "Just as the opposite of goodness is Nothingness, so

too the opposite of a good man is a Nothing-man. The Nothing-man is one who is fascinated

with Nothingness or who confuses creation with Nothingness or who mimics and thus distorts

goodness: Rabbit Angstrom."[421] Hence, continuing with our consideration of Rabbit as being

Kierkegaard's Seducer, his esthetic recreations are ironically deathly-cultivations of nothingness.

Indeed, Rabbit the Seducer's recreation of his relationship with Ruth as a kind of family has

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[418] Ibid., 135.
[419] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 127.
[420] Ibid., 260.
[421] Hunt, *John Updike and the Three Great Secret Things*, 46.

proven indirectly *infertile*. Rabbit's irresponsibility to his drunken, depressed wife, Janice,

produces the chilling death of their newborn child. Janice, who is all the more depressed and

drunken by Rabbit's absence, accidently drowns their baby in the bathtub. The deathly

description that follows involving Janice and the baby is, as critics have noted, filled with

nothingness:

> She lifts the living thing into air and hugs it against her sopping chest. Water
>
> pours off them into the bathroom tiles. The little weightless body flops against her
>
> neck and a quick look of relief at the baby's face gives a fantastic clotted
>
> impression. A contorted memory of how they give artificial respiration pumps
>
> Janice's cold wet arms in frantic rhythmic hugs; under her clenched lids great
>
> scarlet prayers arise, wordless, monotonous, and she seems to be clasping the
>
> knees of a vast third person whose name, Father, Father, beats against her head
>
> like physical blows. Though her wild heart bathes the universe in red, no spark
>
> kindles in the space between her arms; for all of her pouring prayers she doesn't
>
> feel the faintest tremor of an answer in the darkness against her. Her sense of the
>
> third person with them widens enormously, and she knows, knows, while knocks
>
> sound at the door, that the worst thing that has ever happened to any woman in the
>
> world has happened to her.[422]

It seems clear that Rabbit's abandonment of his family for Ruth is, in part, responsible for

begetting the death of Rabbit's and Janice's infant; yet, the preceding description is notably

devoid of Rabbit's responsibility in what has happened. Rather, as Wood has noted, the scene is

not just filled with death and nothingness, but with a kind of nothingness that accusingly

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[422] Ibid., 226-7.

wonders at the absence of God.[423] The idea of God's absence as the cause of Nothingness in the

world is the primary source of ambiguity in Updike's novels. Naming God's absence as the

cause of life's nothingness gives Updike's characters positive license to search for God in any

and every way – no matter the ethical problems left in the dust of the search.

Updike's Excessive Regard for Subjectivity

Updike, in a way not unlike Percy, gives too much credence to the subjective searcher

who looks fleetingly for transcendence and chides the dull conformity attendant to bourgeois life.

The lines between Something and nothingness – between Godliness and sin – seem too

ambiguous in *Rabbit, Run*. The final reinforcement of this ambiguity seems most striking and

confounding to our clear sense of the Good when, after Rabbit's and Ruth's family have

indirectly produced the death of Rabbit and Janice's child, we come to discover that Ruth is

pregnant. It is as if Updike is discontent to leave Mr. Death with the rotten fruit of his

nothingness; although Rabbit's run has been destructive, it has produced *something* in the form

of a baby. In fact, in the final scene, the ambiguity seems to become rather clearly the most

deathly of self-contradictions. Rabbit begs Ruth not to have an abortion, but when she presses

him as to why he cares, he can only respond, "I don't know. I don't know any of these answers.

All I know is what feels right. You feel right to me. Sometimes Janice used to. Sometimes

nothing does." Then, when Ruth presses Rabbit to make a marital commitment to her if he wants

her to keep the child, Rabbit, yet again, feels his freedom constrained: "The way she is fighting

for control of herself repels him; he doesn't like people who manage things. He likes things to

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[423] Wood, "Rabbit Angstrom, Ambiguous Pilgrim," 135.

happen of themselves."[424] Rewarded with the fruit of a child, Rabbit is cast as a bit of a hero for

pursuing transcendence of his boring existence; yet, he has not undergone any change which will

prohibit his destructive running. Indeed, in the end, Rabbit keeps running. I would argue that

Updike's contentment with this problem may result from an implicit misunderstanding of the

delineation in Barth's theology between the "shadow side" of creation and the Nothingness, or

evil, by which this shadow side is capable of being invaded. To make the distinction – one which

Hunt does not make explicit – we must turn to Barth in Volume III, book 3 of his *Church*

Dogmatics:

> What we have called the 'shadow side' of creation is constituted by the 'not'
>
> which in this twofold respect, as its distinction from God and its individual
>
> distinctiveness, pertains to creaturely nature. On this shadow side the creature is
>
> contiguous to nothingness, for this 'not' is at once the expression and frontier of
>
> the positive will, election and activity of God. When the creature crosses the
>
> frontier from the one side, and it is invaded from the other, nothingness achieves
>
> actuality in the creaturely world. But in itself and as such this frontier is not
>
> nothingness, nor has the shadow side of creation any connexion with it. Therefore
>
> all conceptions and doctrines which view nothingness as an essential and
>
> necessary determination of being and existence and therefore of the creature, or as
>
> an essential determination of the original and creative being of God Himself, are
>
> untenable from the Christian standpoint.[425]

The shadow side of God's creation essentially constitutes man's distinctiveness from God as a

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[424] Updike, *Rabbit, Run*, 262.

[425] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.3: The Doctrine of Creation*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960), 350.

creature; hence, the shadow side, though different from the essence of God the Creator by its very susceptibility to evil, is not, therefore, a nothingness or an inherent evil. However, because man is creaturely, or, distinct from God, he necessarily has the ability to be in conflict with God even if he was not created to be so. Hence, man, if he is a creature, retains the possibility of self-destruction – of nothingness – but this nothingness is not inherently part of who God created him to be. Updike seems to want to befuddle precisely these lines of distinction. He seems too sympathetic to man's desire to obstruct the *necessity* which is part of the Kierkegaardian synthesis, and, thus, too willing to degrade ethical commitments as dour obligations which are more complicit with man's self-inflicted nothingness than with the goodness of God's original creative intentions. Further, when these lines are blurred, man's self-destruction – as in the case of Janice's drowning her child – is more easily misconstrued as a nothingness which was caused by God's separation, when, rather, the gulf has been self-inflicted.

Conclusion

Ultimately, while Updike avoids dissatisfactory attempts at redemption, he also implies in the novel in the ways mentioned above that no such redemption is possible in this life – that, in opposition to nothingness, mere "being" (as opposed to fullness of being) is the highest affirmation of humanity and God. One wonders if Updike, in all of his affection for ambiguity, could conceive of a protagonist that lived the ethical life with a passionate, transcending faith. The birth of a child via Ruth seems less an attempt at showing God's ability to produce goodness out of men's evil-biddings, and more like an obsession with a supposed ambiguity between man's God-givenness as a creature and his self-destructive tendency to use his agency qua creature to create distance from God. Communal modes of transcendence and redemption that

are generative – positive, creative – are obviated in Updike's novel not just because Kruppenbach never encounters Rabbit, but also because the shadow side of God's creation – man's distinctiveness as a creature – is ambiguously equated with man's self-imposed nothingness. For Updike, it seems, ethical commitments and finitude are not goods to be passionately and faithfully embraced, but dour nothings to be transcended. And due to life's stultifying ambiguities, it seems all that is left for Rabbit is to run around looking for Something, bypassing this life by playing a kind of god with others. He remains looking for modes of self-transcendence which only perpetuate nothingness within communities along the way – all the while ignorant that the refusal to accept that which makes him a creature before God is precisely the self-destructiveness which prohibits both fulfillment and reconciliation between self and other, however imperfect in this life.

Conclusion

Following Loncar and Kosch in their reading of Søren Kierkegaard, I have sought to emphasize that modern man's despair – his sense of an alienated, dissatisfactory existence – is tied to a widespread, culturally-codified misunderstanding of the nature of freedom. One could argue that this misunderstanding began forcefully with Kantian autonomy and its transposition of the *telos* of authority from the exterior source of revelation to the interior source of man's reasoning faculties. Due primarily to man's apparent lack of disciplined, self-derived ethical motivation, Kant's notion of freedom as rational/moral agency has degenerated into more ruthlessly individualistic forms of self-reliance, self-dependence, and self-sufficiency whereby one is free to pursue his desires along self-created boundaries with little consideration of his fellows. That our increasingly liberal notions of freedom have ironically been degenerative in such an inhumane way must give us pause to reconsider the nature of free human agency and the contours of a satisfying existence.

Part of the aim of this thesis has been to affirm Kierkegaard as a bit of a modern prophet in his keen perception of what it means to exist as a human being. He understood that part of what it means to be human is to be fundamentally constituted by a kind of *givenness*. Yet, while Kierkegaard argued convincingly for the individual's reliance on a revelation from God, and his need for a relationship with that transcendent God, he ultimately does not seem to have affirmed the implications of his own thought regarding man's fundamental need for community life on earth – nor the inherent goodness of this intimate fellowship. The fact that each person is a synthesis of possibility and necessity qua *givenness* is compelling for our understanding of freedom in two particularly related ways: (1) our supreme reliance on other persons in order to have an identity and (2) the necessity for that exteriorly-derived identity to make narrative sense

of our lives – or, to render our lives meaningful from beginning to end. In these ways, Kierkegaard's thought seems to anticipate recent work regarding human agency among thinkers whom I have loosely termed "communitarian."

Thus, in Part One, I have sought to suggest that Kierkegaard's thought – and the intellectual milieu which necessitated it – is also compelling for our consideration of American forms of individualistic alienation and despair, particularly considering Kierkegaard's popularity on the American academic scene during the twentieth century. Further, the distinctly American cultural artifact which both concretizes the abstracted dialectic of freedom and alienation in chapter one, and, thus, also clues us in to its thematic presence in the novels under consideration, is the automobile. While this technology, which boomed during the twentieth century, enabled the individual to enjoy new freedoms particularly attendant to the American Dream, it also often enabled individuals the excessive and destructive independent freedom to avoid or take advantage of others. And, in the conclusion of Part One in chapter three, I sought to make the transition from twentieth-century American culture to the importance of the novels discussed in this thesis by considering the individual's situation within the elements of narrative – a narrative that must be particular, coherent, and communal. This understanding of the importance of narrative and language for the development and fulfillment of selfhood hopefully fosters a revived appreciation of the place of literature – particularly novels – to offer a compelling form of *science*, or *knowledge*. The novels we have discussed do just that: they offer a diagnosis of human existence which modern man must consider more fruitfully as an informative access to truth.

Through the particular and authoritative lens of the Christian narrative, Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and John Updike wrote novels which, in unique ways, offered

Kierkegaardian critiques of excessive freedom by depicting protagonists who experience the

necessarily debilitating consequences of a personal freedom which is devoid of ethical

responsibility. The relationship between literature and religion on the basis of narrative is a

compelling one. In his article "How Religion Resists Secularity," Graham Ward comments,

> It is no surprise . . . that literature and religion are profoundly associated, at a
>
> formal level, through their narrative orientation. Each determinate form of
>
> religion tells a story about the world; each adherent to that religion inserts him- or
>
> herself within that story; and each of the practices of piety whereby that insertion
>
> takes place is a subplot of the grand narrative schema that gives meaning to the
>
> various communities of the faithful. Literature too is indissociable from story-
>
> telling. Even the most modernist (or postmoderninst) fracturing of narrative
>
> structure . . . depends upon the expectations of story-telling. . . . So, although the
>
> fragmentation, narrative rupture and syntactic breaks practiced by certain modern
>
> authors do not presuppose a whole, and sometimes even critique the idea there be
>
> a final answer or resolution, they nevertheless play with the absence of that whole
>
> and the texts would have no coherence at all without anticipated conceptions of
>
> wholeness.[426]

Hence, the very nature of narrative complements O'Connor's, Percy's, and Updike's Christian

and novelistic concern with holistic identity. In addition to the Kierkegaardian critique of

autonomous notions of freedom, the use of the automobile as an American cultural artifact of

excessive freedom, and the implicit affirmation of communitarian wholeness implicit in narrative

structure, O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Percy's *The Moviegoer*, and Updike's *Rabbit, Run* focus on

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[426] Graham Ward, "How Literature Resists Secularity," *Literature and Theology* 24 (March 2010): 76.

the breakdown of particular relationships: in *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes starts an atheistic church of one that is patently against God's existence; in *The Moviegoer*, Jack "Binx" Bolling pursues personal sexual fulfillment with secretaries he has little desire to know, or commit to, in a significantly intimate way; lastly, in *Rabbit, Run*, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom attempts to create a sense of family with a prostitute after abandoning his own family. The implicit problem is that these protagonists' excessive freedom, which is based on the unwieldy authority of personal desire, destroys their relationships and creates destructive ones which actually enslave them to nothingness, because manipulative, self-serving relationships ultimately diminish any coherent sense of identity. Further, I have sought to show that the dialectic of freedom and alienation is so fundamentally relevant to, and constitutive of, the modern condition, that some of the most prominent themes in each novel – violence in O'Connor's, conversation in Percy's, and basketball in Updike's – are directly connected to the overarching theme of autonomous freedom and alienation.

Yet, despite these compelling critiques of the problems attendant to autonomous notions of freedom, the three authors' novels are also Kierkegaardian, whether wittingly or not, in the sense that they lack redemptive depictions that do not just reconcile man to God, but reconcile man with his fellows. In this way, each novel – O'Connor's and Percy's in particular, as they especially intended to depict redemptive resolutions – is a bit dissatisfactory, for they each lack the communal resolution that the problem of existential alienation calls for: reconciled community life. That is, each novel ultimately fails to offer a compelling depiction of a character living freely and transcendently – in the fullness of being – precisely because of, and not in spite of, intimate ethical commitments between self and significant others. And, ultimately, this seems inimical to the historically generative, eternal hope of the Christian narrative, which creates the

realization of a scenario in this life in which communal relationships offer the compelling

vocabularies and actions – grace, forgiveness, mercy, gift, sacrifice, etc. – that provide both a

fulfilling identity and the essential signals of a more permanent form of transcendence. In short,

rather than demanding an individual freedom which promotes personal sovereignty and the

manipulation of others for the stimulation of self, our freedom must be qualified by the

authoritative boundaries which will promote the intimate benefit of both self and other. Instead

of seeking an incoherent, onanistic freedom, we must situate our freedom within a story which

promotes a fruitful, unifying, and generative intercourse – and call into question those among us

whose "freedom" or "rights" would severely undermine it.

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