ABSTRACT

Reading as an *Imitatio Christi*:
Flannery O'Connor and the Hermeneutics of Cruci-Form Beauty

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At its simplest, this dissertation proposes two, possibly counterintuitive but mutually dependent, claims: 1) that O'Connor's fiction can be, even must be, considered "beautiful," and 2) that O'Connor writes the way she does to make her audience better readers. Given the dark, shocking, grotesque, even carnivalesque character that pervades all her fiction, this first claim is likely to give the greatest offense or at least engender the most skepticism. But, as I argue throughout this work, it is essential that we be able to first conceive of her work as beautiful in order to also preempt one of the main objections to my second claim, a claim that O'Connor herself would be wary of endorsing in so far that it suggests and then elevates the didactic or pedagogical function of her art. To say she hopes to make better readers out of us would seem to suggest that her real contribution is as a schoolmarm rather than as an artist. Even worse, it would

seem to place O'Connor squarely in that category of writing that she so abhorred: sentimental, pietistic moralizing in the guise of "fiction."

And yet, if we can entertain the possibility of O'Connor's work as exemplifying beauty, I argue that we can also: 1) avoid suggesting as so many have that O'Connor's work perpetrates a fundamental violence on her characters and/or readers (thereby further ratifying modern assumptions regarding the essential inevitability of violence); and 2) entertain the possibility that a non-violent, non-manipulative apprehension of the beautiful is in fact the ability to see or more clearly, or as in this case, to read more clearly. Indeed, as David Hart shows, only by restoring "the beautiful" as a proper dimension of not just aesthetic, but philosophical, theological, ecclesiological and ethical reflection, can we even conceive of a speech-act that is not ultimately just another expression of one violence over another in an interminable, self-extinguishing cycle.

Reading as an *Imitatio Christi*: Flannery O'Connor and the Hermeneutics of Cruci-Form Beauty

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PREFACE

In the midst of writing this dissertation I received an email from my church announcing the baptism of a young, pre-teen girl. The email arrived on a Friday and announced that the baptism would take place the next day, a Saturday. In the note, the pastor acknowledged that the timing was "unusual," but suggested this would be "best" given the family's "difficult circumstances." The difficulty, we all knew, was that the young girl's mother had just been brought home for Hospice care after her doctors announced that the cancer treatments were not working and that they had exhausted all options. Less than six months before, the mother, a young professor in the Honors College of my university, seemed to be a picture of human flourishing. Now, they said, it was only a matter of time.

The baptism took place precisely at noon, on a very hot, sunny Texas Saturday. Several members of the congregation held cameras to record the event for the girl's mother who was obviously too ill to attend—someone had even set up a laptop on a stepladder so the mother could be present via Skype (if ever there was an argument for the possibility of technology as a sacrament, this would be it). As could be expected, the baptism was a somber occasion; the pastor as well as the community of observers did their best to proclaim the joy of

the occasion and affirm the Apostle's creed in the midst of cracking voices and tears rolling down from behind their sunglasses. When the girl came up out of the water (not altogether coincidentally, the church has repurposed an old cow trough to be used as a baptismal), there were some smiles and more tears, but none of the usual clapping or laughing that so often accompanies such an occasion. Certainly, there was much about this "celebration" that was unusual, perhaps even unnatural and grotesque.

I had arrived a few minutes late to the baptism, having rushed off from my carrel in the University library. I had just been reading William Cavanaugh's work on *Torture and the Eucharist* and, as I too stumbled and cracked my way through our creedal affirmation, I couldn't help but consider its implications for the setting of this baptism. Cavanaugh argues that the church's truest response to torture—to a tyrannous dictatorship whose greatest weapon is to dissolve any communal bonds by "disappearing" and dismembering its own citizens—is, in fact, the celebration of the Eucharist. In the same way that celebration of the Eucharist in Chile re-membered and renamed the faithful gathered there as they literally ingested and became united in the Body of Christ, here we were in the face of unthinkable grief and loss, the inevitability of which nearly left us all speechless, *celebrating* one of our own member's decision to be buried with Christ. In the face of tremendous suffering and the certainty of impending death,

here we were collectively, communally celebrating yet another—in this case, even voluntary—death.

And yet, even as I write these words, words I have heard and have repeated throughout my life, reading them makes me uneasy. Not altogether unreasonably, such language tends to make us wary; perhaps especially so after 9/11, it seems “unnatural,” morbid and too prone to distortion, abuse, and “extremism.”

But it seems to me that something very much like this tension—this unusual Saturdayness of being doubly caught between the “goodness” of Friday's crucifixion and the judgment of Sunday’s resurrection—animates much of our attempt to make sense of Flannery O’Connor work. Most, if not all, of her characters are ugly, mean-spirited, narrow-minded, or arrogant in their assiduously backward ways, and so many of them, perhaps especially the ones we find most tolerable as human beings, those we might be able to consider our neighbors, lose either limb or life before the story ends. Hers is clearly a fiction of the cross, rather than of a cheery, eastery Sunday morning—a realization which is only made worse by the fact that the more we read O’Connor, the more she seems to accomplish her intentions. The violence we read about in her stories is a violence we eventually tend "to feel in our bones, if no where else" (*MM* 162).

And yet, mercifully, most of us also sense, even if we can't articulate it or explain why, that "something is going on here that counts." Since her death in 1964, a not insignificant body of scholarship that we now refer to as "O'Connor Studies" has grappled with both the power her stories seem to exercise over her readers as well as the disturbing dimensions of her fiction. "What does this startling imaginative vision say about O'Connor? What does this say about her as Artist? As an Author? As a Catholic?" we ask. Most of us, I suppose, ask these questions as a way of also asking, "What does this say about me as a reader? As a spectator? As a consumer? Should I condemn her work, appreciate it, or simply try to ignore it?" For most of us, this last one is hardly an option, and so we go back and read and re-read her prose, her letters, her stories and the stories from her friends. For so many of us who have encountered her work, in more ways than one, this *is* our Saturday's work.

As with the celebration of the Eucharist in the face of torture, or a baptism in the face of terminal cancer, as O'Connor readers we have a renewed sense that what is said in her stories matters and that if we are to do her words justice and avoid inflicting violence upon them (or ourselves), we must watch our steps and take great care in what we say—perhaps being especially careful to not simply take the broad road and wide gate, even if this means passing by St. Cyril's dragon who seeks to devour us. With O'Connor we recognize that death and

pain are a serious matter, while at the same time celebrating, indeed laughing, in the recognition that these do not have the last word. Along with O'Connor, we who are Christians take great comfort and courage in the assurance that there is indeed a Word who has defeated violence by bearing upon himself all violences, who in his death defeated all death that we might be dead to its power, who fills all manner of time with his infinite self-giving, who by taking upon Himself the stuff of this earth proclaims the mattering of all matter; a Word, in short, who makes all words new—even when, especially when, we hear: "it's only a matter of time."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project owes its beginning, middle and end not simply to the intellectual input from a whole host of teachers and scholars, but to the faithful, lived-out example of Christ-followers whose humility, hospitality, and generosity is itself an imitation of the one who declared in word and deed, "Be it unto me according to thy Word." In more ways than I could possibly enumerate, they have borne the image of Christ in their own flesh and in their constant refusal to accept a radical distinction between their worship and their scholarship have been a real presence of Christ to me. I consider the gift of their time, encouragement, wisdom, and attention to be in no small way a reflection of the Triune One who is Gift.

Among these, I am especially indebted to Peter Candler's own reflections regarding the community of readers with whom and by whom we read. His work offered me a way forward when all I could think of was turning back. Richard Russell knew always when to ask about my progress and about my well-being. Phil Donnelly could never be persuaded by my discouragement and instead unfailingly offered hope and help when I needed it most. His care in making distinctions and in articulating positions he disagrees with have served as a model I can only hope to approximate. Similarly, Luke Ferretter's gift for

always asking great questions animated and clarified my thinking throughout the process and set a high standard I hope to emulate. Through his example inside and outside the classroom, David Jeffrey has left a permanent imprint on the way I read just about everything, texts as much as the world—though I suspect that no one who has seen and heard a six-foot five, Scots-Canadian cowboy well up as he recites Psalm 19 ever escapes unscathed. I have had the good fortune of being present to such an occasion more than once. And though it is so obvious that his careful scholarship and example as a teacher permeates what follows, I can think of no more fitting tribute to Ralph Wood than to simply say that he loves weddings and babies more than anyone I know. Such joy has been life giving to me.

My family and Waco friends have been a source of constant support and encouragement, without ever suggesting that their love for me depended in any way on whether I could see this through to the end. And finally, my wife Hillary has borne the brunt of my sins more than anyone and yet has been the one constant presence of Beauty, Truth, and Goodness in my life. Every day, she gives others the gift of herself. For both Amelie and me, she is what we think of when we think of home.

DEDICATION

In Memory of Eugene Train

"Though he holy were and virtuous, He was to sinful men nought despitous, …
But in his teching discreet and benigne, to drawen folk to hevene by fairnesse
By good ensample—this was his bisinesse"

(1920-2013)

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

> We no longer dare to believe in beauty and we make of it a mere appearance in order the more easily to dispose of it. Our situation today shows that beauty demands from itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated and banned from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.
>
> —Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Seeing the Form* 18)

In his work on *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, John Sykes offers this profound and possibly unsettling observation:

> O'Connor then might be said to be on the attack on two fronts. First, she exhibits a certain fierceness towards her characters, giving moral and intellectual judgments ascendancy over feeling. […] And second, she is out to assault the reader's sense of propriety and normalcy. […I]n fact, *O'Connor intends readerly violence to all her readers*, believers and unbelievers alike, not excluding herself. *For, ultimately, she hopes to precipitate an act of reading that is itself a kind of* imitatio Christi*, or more accurately, an* imitatio crucis." (44 emphasis mine)

Leading up to this dual-pronged account of violence in O'Connor's fiction, Sykes has prepared his own readers by skillfully narrating the complexity of O'Connor's indebtedness to and ultimate departure from both a Southern "aesthetic of memory" and the Jamesian dictum to "show not tell." As Sykes rightly shows, despite O'Connor's aesthetic apprenticeship to and clear abiding sympathies with the Modernist aesthetic, O'Connor seems ultimately to have

resisted (if not outright rejected) the limitations these placed on her understanding of her vocation as both a Catholic and an artist, as one who joins "God in saving humanity—not through sacrament or proclamation, but through a special kind of making with its own restorative goodness" (8). For O'Connor, the modernist's "symbol" and "epiphany" are ultimately insufficient (though in many ways still propaedeutic) for the kind of theophany and revelation her art (at least in its most mature form) aims towards: "a breaking in of the divine" that understands the Gospel as "the truth that was already there, obscured by the human penchant for indifference and self-deception" (2). The transcendence of the anagogical dimension or theophany, then, as opposed to the literary symbol circumscribed by the limitations of human consciousness, becomes the defining characteristic of what Sykes calls O'Connor's Aesthetic of Revelation: "she wishes to render transparent scenes of divine mystery ordinarily invisible to world-weary modern eyes" (3).

At this juncture, Sykes' erudite account of O'Connor's aesthetics admits at least two observations which serve as an impetus for the remainder of this dissertation. The first thing to notice is the underlying (possibly inescapable) hermeneutical or interpretative dimension of O'Connor's aesthetic. By this I do not simply mean that O'Connor, as with all artists, is concerned with the how her work is received. Rather, what Sykes' formulation of O'Connor's aesthetic

begins to make clear is that her art is always concerned with teaching the reader to read properly, to read not only words on a page but the Word as it is written, as Augustine says, on the vellum of history and creation (*Confessions* XIII.15.2).[1] As the quotes above suggest (and the richly varied testimony of O'Connor's readers attest to), whatever else O'Connor's characters *and* readers "get" out of her stories, they will inevitably be confronted—often in less than comfortable ways—with a different way of seeing.

The second observation goes as follows: that grace should need to "break in" serves as both a descriptor of what happens in O'Connor's stories and a *justification* for how it happens. There is perhaps no more famous O'Connor saying than the one Sykes alludes to in the quote above:

> The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind your draw large and startling figures. (*MM* 33–34)

[1] See here especially David Jeffrey's chapter on "The Book Without and the Book Within" in his *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (139–150).

Given this and other similar comments from O'Connor, Sykes' contention that she sought to prompt a Christ-imitative reading grows out of his central conviction that "violence in O'Connor is cruciform," (42) that by receiving the violence of the cross and partaking in Christ's suffering, what might otherwise be destructive actually becomes a vehicle not only for revelation but also redemption. Certainly, O'Connor's own statements offer ample support for Sykes' claim:

> Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them. The devil's greatest wile, Baudelaire has said, is to convince us that he does not exist. […] I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work. This idea, that reality is something to which we must be returned at considerable cost, is one which is seldom understood by the casual reader, but it is one which is implicit in the Christian view of the world. (*MM* 111)

Her remarks in another essay further confirm Sykes' claim that she intends violence towards her readers—what we might call the "cost" of returning them to reality—though this time they are concerned more explicitly with her readers:

> The Catholic writer often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it. This means frequently that he must resort to violent literary means to get his vision across to a hostile audience, and the images and actions he creates may seem distorted and exaggerated. (*MM* 185)

That O'Connor's characters, no less than the author herself, regularly experience startlingly revelations of grace through their suffering and that this suffering (sometimes self-inflicted) nearly always is identified with or echoes Christ's suffering has been made sufficiently clear through O'Connor's non-fiction writings and the rich body of criticism that has grown out of her work.

In this regard, Sykes' two chapters on the role of the body and the Eucharist in O'Connor's fiction offer a finely nuanced perspective of the tension she faced that neither portrays O'Connor in the end as a divided self nor trivializes the merit of her aesthetic and religious formation. In his chapter on "O'Connor and the Body," for example, Sykes shows how characters like Haze Motes, Francis Tarwater or O.E. Parker "write" their repentance on their own bodies and, in their very flesh, become "witnesses" of Christ. Others, like Mr. Guizac in "The Displaced Person," become an *accessus* to the Body of Christ through the suffering they experience in their own bodies and thereby offer clear instances of the *imitatio crucis*.

Here, Sykes' exploration of the body as the locus of both suffering and redemption in O'Connor's fiction is rightly and fruitfully rooted in a rich theological understanding of the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation, Atonement, and Creation. Against a modern consciousness that has either ignored or severely distorted the destructive presence of evil and sin, these

doctrines nonetheless proclaim the essential "role of the body in salvation," "the value of human suffering," and an "understanding of evil as privation of good," respectively (45). Without these (especially the last), Sykes persuasively argues throughout his readings of O'Connor's fiction, we would be forced to characterize O'Connor's use of violence as not simply mysterious but also "malicious" (45).

What Sykes' work leaves open, however, is a more thorough account of what precisely an "act of reading that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*" would look like, especially in regards to the "violence" a reader must first receive. In his emphasis on the suffering body and the Eucharist as a participation in the Body of Christ, Sykes persuasively describes how the violence O'Connor's characters suffer becomes the occasion for revelation. But what about his claim that O'Connor intends "readerly violence to all her readers, believers and unbelievers alike, not excluding herself"? What kind of revelation is made possible for the readers and what precisely is required, either from the story itself or the reader? In what sense does or could a *reader* actually imitate Christ or participate in his suffering? What, in fact, does it look like for O'Connor primarily, but also for Sykes, to "suffer" as a reader? And if indeed what the reader "suffers" from is a shock that startles him or her out of a "sense of propriety and normalcy," are any and all such disturbing revelations necessarily

redemptive? Or to put the question slightly differently, to what degree is the "suffering" a reader experiences at the hand of O'Connor's art actually analogous to either the "imperceptible intrusions of grace" or the "violences which preceded and follow them" that O'Connor's characters famously experience?

More significantly, saying that O'Connor "intends readerly violence on all her readers" raises questions that deserve more attention than Sykes gives them. Despite O'Connor's willingness to describe her work in such terms, legitimating and understanding the nature of this "violence" of grace always walks a fine line, open as it is to so much potential abuse and mischaracterization. Perhaps especially so in a post 9/11 world,[2] O'Connor's, often-quoted defense, though instructive, would most likely seem unsatisfactory in that it assents too readily to a conception of reality as ineluctably inscribed in violence: "With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. […] Violence is a force which can be

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[2] It is not altogether extraneous to the questions I raise here, to insist that this phrase should refer to not just the terrible events of that September day, but also the wars that came after it and, perhaps especially, America's reliance on the Guantanamo prison as a means for ensuring "homeland security." For better or worse, the public dialogue over such questions as the practice of "waterboarding," for example, despite its propensity for hampering genuine discussion, inevitably, almost irresistibly, lends an urgency and weight to the questions I seek to engage here. Such questions seem especially pertinent in light of William Cavanaugh's work on *Torture and the Eucharist*, to which we shall return in the next chapter.

used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven" (*MM* 113).

Sykes is of course acutely aware of the fine line he is tracing when he explains that Christ's suffering is redemptive precisely because it is a "passive violence," one that endures rather than perpetrates, and in so doing offers a "counterviolence that receives violence and turns it against itself in the interest of peace" (41). Insofar that a *reader* can be a passive recipient of violence—what would amount to a kind of hermeneutical counterviolence—Sykes' analogy for a cruciform way of reading seems plausible, if undefined. But what does it suggest about her aesthetic philosophy, or even about O'Connor herself as the *auctor* or perpetrator of such violence, especially since Sykes himself says a few sentences later that "From the standpoint of human agency, active violence is always motivated by sin [...]" (41)? Or to put the question slightly differently and in the terms Sykes himself employs, do we really mean to say that "violence" (even one which precipitates a cruciform suffering) really forms the basis of that "special kind making with its own restorative goodness" by which an artist joins "God in saving humanity"? Moreover, to what extent does such authorial violence legitimize, or even promote, a corresponding hermeneutical violence from a reader seeking an interpretive author-ity over a text?

In an early letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor offers a preliminary, though crucial qualification of both her and the Catholic Church's position on the use of violence:

> […] I can't concede that I'm a fascist. I am wondering why you convict me of believing in the use of force? It must be because you connect the Church with a belief in the use of force; but the Church is a mystical body which cannot, does not, believe in the use of force (in the sense of forcing conscience, denying the rights of conscience, etc.). I know all her hair-raising history, of course, but principle must be separated from policy. I in principle do not believe in the use of force, but I might well find myself using it, in which case I would have to convict myself of sin. (*HOB* 99)

O'Connor's indignation towards Hester's accusation is palpable, and it should certainly give us pause over the language we use to describe her sense of the effect she has on her readers. What O'Connor appears to mean by a violence that "is capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace," and what Sykes is getting at by his notion of a passive or counter violence, then, is that if indeed her art is a form of "violence," it is not so in the sense that it inflicts real damage on the truest form of the self. This "violence" is no destroyer of genuine personhood but rather what guarantees and preserves it from the many forces or impulses (often self-inflicted) that threaten to harm its very existence or being-ness. If it is a "violence," it is only so because the truth has dis-covered and disarmed the deceit, often only after a great deal of suffering. In this sense, what is being

destroyed, then, is in fact the nothingness, the uncreated void which opposes the flourishing of existence itself.

Nevertheless, even this recasting of "violence," especially in regards to the unequivocal demands it places on the receiver of such an art, can still appear to lend credence to the Nietzschean accusation that all gospels of peace are ultimately coercive assertions of power over and against an other—subterfuge narratives in which the capacity for destruction lies precisely in their refusal to admit their own thirst for violence. From this perspective (one which I ultimately reject but seek to engage throughout this dissertation), perhaps what O'Connor's and Sykes' language admits is simply that violence is inescapable and that all art, especially that which stems from an aesthetic refusing to acknowledge its own persuasive agenda, is merely coercive rhetoric in disguise.

John Hawkes, O'Connor's fellow novelist, friend and long-time correspondent, proposed as much in his letters to her (dating as far back as 1958) and is generally credited with initiating an approach to O'Connor studies that persists to this day. In a 1962 essay (published two years before her death) on "Flannery O'Connor's Devil," Hawkes famously claims that O'Connor's "'true' fictional allegiance" is often, if not always, "happily on the side of the devil" (400, 406). Throughout O'Connor's fiction, he argues,

> the creative process transforms the writer's objective Catholic knowledge of the devil into an authorial attitude in itself in some

> measure diabolical. This is to say that in Flannery O'Connor's most familiar stories and novels the "disbelief . . . that we breathe in with the air of the times" emerges fully as two-sided or complex as "attraction for the Holy." (401) […T]he devil takes obvious pleasure in going about his own "bidnis" and the author takes a similar obvious pleasure in going about hers. And there are numerous examples to indicate that the author's view of "everybody else" *is exactly the same* as her devil's view. (402–3 emphasis mine)

As Hawkes himself admits, O'Connor repeatedly rejected any interpretation of her work suggesting she was collaborating in Nietzsche's project, and yet Hawkes' thesis retains a significant appeal to this day. One reason why is that even the most sanguine of O'Connor's readers—those whom Timothy Carron has somewhat uncharitably dubbed O'Connor's "camp," or True Believers—have not done enough to discourage such a view, and have often, unwittingly, accomplished quite the opposite.

In the next chapter, I offer a more detailed discussion of the contributions and limitations of a few, revealing attempts to characterize violence in O'Connor, especially towards her readers. Ultimately, I seek to show that this critical weakness, oversight, or perhaps misprision—in light of the work of David Bentley Hart in theological aesthetics—is a result of an inadequate appreciation of beauty as the proper subject and character of all aesthetic, theological, and ethical inquiries. What many of these commentators do get right is their insistence that O'Connor's upends our "natural" expectations (the scare quotes here both anticipate and allow for a later, crucial distinction). And the best of

these show us how this disruption of normalcy is in fact a consequence of the formal, aesthetic integrity of the work and not, something external, accidental, or imposed on it. Where they sometimes fall short, though, is in failing to acknowledge that any work of art—so long as we can properly call it beautiful—must also upend our "natural" inclination to suggest that the artist accomplishes her task by recourse to violence, whether towards her art, her characters or her readers. Failing to understand beauty as indeed the proper means and end of any true work of art, is thus to engage not only in a drastic misreading, but one which enacts a fundamental violence against it. And if what O'Connor and the Church say about art is true, then such a reading is ultimately a form of self-violence as well.

Given that most of us primarily associate "beauty" with being pretty, nice, and comforting, one can hardly blame O'Connor or her critics for avoiding such language. Indeed, there can be no doubt that O'Connor's work endures and has provoked such an unprecedented body of criticism precisely because she refused to subject her art to the self-affirming, reassuring designs of "the advertising agencies"[3] or the demands from her Catholic constituency that she offer stories

[3] In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," an essay that is central to the concerns I explore here and which I will return to throughout the present work, O'Connor follows her comment about shouting and drawing startling figures with a paragraph which, as Thomas Hibbs shows in *Arts of Darkness: American Noir and the Quest for Redemption* (3–27), offers an astute

that were morally "edifying." What the work of David Hart reminds us, however, is that the beautiful was not always equated with the sentimental or saccharine and that by restoring it to its proper place, we can once again conceive of a form of persuasion that rejects and ultimately transcends all violence, especially in our interpretations of texts and the world around us. Rather than diminish the significance of suffering or the horror we feel in the face of such violences as appear in O'Connor's fiction, I argue that a renewed conception of beauty intensifies and rightly orders its meaning without also justifying violence as a means, making it an end itself, or implying the primal necessity of evil. In short, I contend that Hart's appropriation of Von Balthasar's defense of Christianity as "*the* aesthetic religion *par excellence*" (*The Glory,* 216), should compel us to place beauty rather than violence at the forefront of our understanding what it means "to precipitate an act of reading that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*" (Sykes 44). To do so, however, we must also insist on the primacy of the doctrine of the Trinity in articulating how an *imitatio crucis* could

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description for the art which has had the most enduring impact over the last sixty years: "Unless we are willing to accept our artists as they are, the answer to the question, "Who speaks for America today?" will have to be: the advertising agencies. They are entirely capable of showing us our unparalleled prosperity and our almost classless society, and no one has ever accused them of not being affirmative. Where the artist is still trusted, he will not be looked to for assurance. Those who believe that art proceeds from a healthy, and not a diseased, faculty of the mind will take what he shows them as a revelation, not of what we ought to be but of what we are at a given time and under given circumstances; that is, as a limited revelation but a revelation nonetheless" (*CW* 806).

offer a participation in the infinite self-giving of Being rather than yet another instance of self-annihilating violence—that is, beauty rather than ritual sacrifice. Moreover, I argue that such a conception is not only perfectly consonant within a comprehensive view of O'Connor's aesthetic and theological framework, but must finally be the point of departure for any hermeneutical venture which seeks to reject—in theory and practice—the notion that violence, either towards the text or its audience, is inevitable and necessary.

Thus, in Chapter Three I first examine the theological basis for Girardian attempts within O'Connor studies to account for and justify readerly suffering—what Sykes calls the *imitatio crucis*—as a means for revelation. In light of John Milbank and David Hart's critique of René Girard, I then propose a corrective by referring to David Hart's and Hans von Balthasar's insistence on Christ as the *form* of beauty. What this account of beauty enables us to understand is why, for example, Jacques Maritain's recovery of the Thomistic insistence on art as "reason in making" was so helpful to her (as so many of O'Connor's readers have already noted).[4] For Maritain offered her not a convenient excuse by which she could justify using any means to convey her art—so long as she could articulate (and thereby dictate subsequent receptions of) her work as con-

[4] See especially, John Desmond's *Risen Sons*, Farrell O'Gorman's *Peculiar Crossroads*, John Sykes's *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetics of Revelation.*

forming to the "good of that which is made." Rather, he offered her a way to see that her content *is* her form: i.e. the Beauty of Christ. In this way, the form of the kenotic self-emptying Christ who upends our "natural" expectations, our "natural" impulse towards violence, by proclaiming a peace that finally overcomes all violences and by showing us what our true nature is, becomes not only a model for the artist and her art—one that draws all things unto itself for the sake of its own integrity and the pleasure it finds in "otherness"—but also for the reader. And something very much like this, perhaps paradoxically for our modern assumptions about reading, is the notion of freedom O'Connor propounds throughout her entire oeuvre—a freedom gained not by the assertion of one self over and above another, but in submission to a theology, aesthetic, and ethic which enables one to see others and self as emanating from and being drawn to the God whose self-giving knows no boundaries. In the end, what Hart's work in theological aesthetics can show us is that in order to articulate what it might mean to "read sacramentally" without also implying the primacy or necessity of authorial violence (God's or the artist's), we need first to recover an understanding of Christ as the *form* of a Triune beauty whose infinite self-giving serves as both the model and means for every true instance of aesthetic creation or reception.

To do this, however, as O'Connor well knew, we need to be shaped by stories that can help us both inhabit human particularity as well as embrace its essential mystery. Thus, in Chapter Four, I show how the Church (its texts, its theologians, and its traditions) shaped O'Connor's *readerly* imagination and thereby her sense of the effect her work could have on her audience. Here I emphasize both the ecclesiastical roots and hermeneutical implications of O'Connor's two fundamental departures from the Modernist and New Critical aesthetic of her day: 1) that Dogma was essential for preserving Mystery and 2) O'Connor's growing sense (*pace* the crusade against such literary "heresies" or "fallacies") that the power of art to evoke an ever-deepening engagement with itself was in some sense dependent on an alignment between the reader's will and the author's intent. Drawing on Hart's critique of a "radical hermeneutics" and Peter Candler's distinction between ecclesiastical and modern assumptions about reading, I suggest that the "interestedness" of O'Connor's art does not, in fact, enact violence towards her readers, but rather becomes precisely the means through which she unmasks the narratives that justify their own violent hermeneutical postures. For if John Milbank is right to suggest that when one is absolutely "safe" from the violence before one's gaze, one becomes also a perpetrator of violence, we might say that O'Connor's "violent" art is in fact non-violent precisely when it involves the reader, when the reader cannot simply

enjoy it as mere spectacle.[5] Ultimately, such a conclusion requires the possibility of considering beauty and art as fundamentally freedom-granting rather than coercive entities.

In Chapter Five I then read O'Connor's "Parker's Back" over and against John Hawkes' contemporaneous novel *Second Skin* as illustrating the way that O'Connor's work anticipates, responds to and rejects the ultimately nihilistic subjectivity that characterizes much of the "postmodern" art that follows soon after her death. The striking parallels between the two stories (bodily tattoos and the significance or, as in Hawkes' case, *insignificance*, of names) in light of their marked difference in what O'Connor might call their "total effect," further highlights the way in which O'Connor's aesthetic employs yet finally transcends both modern and post-modern aesthetic assumptions. Furthermore, these parallels enable us to also distinguish between forms of "readerly violence" so radically opposed to each other that we are forced again to consider whether the word "violence" can even bear the weight of such difference. Ultimately, doing so will involve making judgments about what can be rightfully called "beautiful" and what is required before we are able to perceive it as such.

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[5] See Milbank's essay on "Violence and Double Passivity" in *Must Christianity be Violent: Reflections on History, Practice, and Theology*, especially pp. 187-193.

In the final chapter I offer a reading of O'Connor's last novel that ultimately seeks to flesh out and test the conclusions I have reached in the preceding chapters. Throughout, I ask whether and in what sense *The Violent Bear It Away* can "precipitate an act of reading that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*"? Focusing specifically on the language of vision and seeing that pervades the story, I seek to draw parallels and distinctions between the revelations to which the two main protagonists of the story are brought and the kind of revelations which O'Connor seems to intend for her reader. Again, Hart's six-fold depiction of beauty affords us a remarkably perceptive way to demarcate not only the two opposing narratives espoused by Rayber and Francis Tarwater, but also the nature and agency of the suffering that must be endured before a vision of an inexhaustible fullness, of a delight which is ever more delightful, can be experienced. For O'Connor, it is clear that something like this encounter with beauty is indeed what she means by "the violence of a single-minded respect for truth" and essential to any understanding of what it might mean for any reader to participate in Christ's suffering on the cross. Like the final image in the novel, the model for such an encounter is not ultimately one of self-flagellation or even the modernist notion of epiphany, but rather that of a banquet in which the infinite multiplication of the giving of gifts finally overwhelms every propensity to consume and be consumed.

To say that O'Connor hopes through her art to help her audience become better readers is of a piece with what we've been saying about beauty and her aesthetic framework. Only in the context of an appreciation of beauty can we conceive of this "intention" as rejecting rather than instantiating a kind of violence towards both her art and her audience. Only when we recognize beauty as a gift, the true form of difference, and both the shape and destination of desire, can we avoid an interpretive pillaging of what is not rightfully ours, collapsing all others into sameness, and coming face to face with, as if in two opposing mirrors, an infinite emptiness. And this is, as I shall argue in the next few chapters, a framework that is derived from her own readerly apprenticeship to the Catholic Church. But as I show in the final chapter, learning to read the world and texts rightly in fact involves being confronted with our own penchants for hermeneutical violence, with the ways in which we fail to acknowledge true difference, the limits of our own subjectivity or self-serving interests. For most of us, coming to terms with the beauty's gift-demand—that we allow beauty itself to cultivate a desire for and delight in that which speaks most truthfully of the reality and source of our own desirability and delightfulness—will require no small amount of suffering, if only because we are so accustomed to accepting violence as the only expression of being.

CHAPTER TWO

A Christ-Haunted Hermeneutic: Reconsidering "Readerly Violence" in O'Connor as a Rhetoric of Peace

> Beauty is a category indispensable to Christian thought: all that theology says of the triune life of God, the gratuity of creation, the incarnation of the Word, and the salvation of the world makes room for—indeed depends upon—a thought, and a narrative, of the beautiful.
>
> —David B. Hart (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 16)

Though crucial distinctions need to be acknowledged as to the presuppositions and the ultimate implications of their claims, Sykes' contention that O'Connor "intends readerly violence to all her readers" has several predecessors among O'Connor's critics. The title itself of Thelma Shinn's 1968 article is indicative of a well-traveled approach: "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace." Quoting some of the scant available O'Connor criticism at that time, Shinn explains,

> Miss O'Connor used violence to convey her vision because she knew that the violence of rejection in the modern world *demands an equal violence of redemption*—man needs to be "struck" by mercy; God must overpower him. "In a corrupt world," Miss O'Connor is saying, "redemption is possible only through an extreme act, an act of absolute irrevocable sacrifice." (58 emphasis mine)

After offering a brief analysis of "redemptive violence" in O'Connor's two novels and "The Lame Shall Enter First," Shinn concludes, "Miss O'Connor's violence had conveyed her vision and her vision had revealed its violence" (73). Shinn is

clearly a sensitive and astute reader, demonstrating a familiarity with the body of O'Connor's work as well as an astute critic of attempts to treat O'Connor as simply an allegorist. And yet, she seems untroubled by the implication of her argument that violence is not only necessary, but, in a sense, creative. Both the assumptions guiding her argument and the implications (perhaps unintended) are revealed in the specific premises she employs to develop her argument. For example, after dividing O'Connor's characters into two major categories—the "spiritual grotesques" who destroy their bodies to save their souls and the "secular grotesques" who destroy their spirit to save their bodies—Shinn remarks that

> Miss O'Connor is more influenced by the Biblical parables than the medieval morality plays. Each of the parables, couched in the violence Miss O'Connor sees necessary to wake the 'sleeping children of God,' expresses a variation of her vision—a vision that demands that man look beyond the secular to the spiritual, that he turn away from the "comforts of home" to the pain of penance—to what [Graham] Greene calls "the appalling….strangeness of the mercy of God." (67)

This statement is especially revealing not simply because it tends to value a Gnostic affirmation of "going beyond," of transcending or escaping the secular, but because it explicitly links this "necessary" violence to the "violence" of parables in the Bible. Shinn is of course right to note the influence of Biblical literature on O'Connor (in fact, I develop this claim in Chapter 3), but ultimately we must acknowledge that Shinn presents a vision of both the artist and God

that tends to absolve them of using violent means to accomplish a creative end. At very least, her argument and the theology she seems to be drawing on calls for greater clarification, if only because she is far from being the last critic to suggest that both O'Connor and God do their work by "overpowering" their audiences.

In her 1986 essay, "Flannery O'Connor's Short Stories: The Assault on the Reader," Shirley Foster argues that O'Connor's stories "owe their striking impact not only to the violence which they embody in terms of character and event, but also to the violence which they enact on the reader" (159). She explains,

> In almost all of [O'Connor's] fiction - and certainly in her best short stories - her deflationary technique includes the audience in its targets; as the main characters, suffering from some kind of illusion, are subjected to a violent and unanticipated denouement, the force of which depends on an ironic incongruity between situation and outcome, so we, the observers, lured into a false reading of tone and implication, experience the same shock of unpreparedness as our anticipations are overturned. (260)

Foster's thesis concerning overturned anticipations clearly also bears an affinity to Sykes's claim, and yet, as with Shinn's argument, there are crucial differences. For one, Foster seems to dismiss the possibility that this unanticipated readerly "denouement" is consistent with and grows out of O'Connor's Catholicism. Asserting that O'Connor's aesthetic vision "is not wholly dependent on acceptance of the Catholic implications of her work," Foster argues that O'Connor's

> […] moral vision is translated into an *aesthetic of discomposure* which forces those readers who demand a "redemptive act" from literature into acknowledging the price of such illumination—the suggestion of pain and shock involved in this process is particularly significant–and *which transcends an exclusively theological reference*. The reader is exposed to the surprises and apparent discrepancies of her narratives without being able to fit them *into a reassuring scheme*; indeed, if her characters ultimately achieve grace, it is offered them with a finality denied her audience for whom the story's ending is not an apocalyptic and conclusive revelation but a disorienting experience which challenges the assumed relationship between narrator, reader, and fictional material. (261 emphasis mine)

Though O'Connor (and Sykes) would readily agree that her stories are disorienting and offered no conclusive (i.e. neat, distilled, easily-identifiable) revelation, she would never assent to Foster's suggestion that Catholicism represented "a reassuring scheme." We need not rehearse the many references from O'Connor herself and her readers that point to exactly the opposite case. What is important, however, is that we connect this refusal to acknowledge the significance of O'Connor's Catholicism in shaping her aesthetic imagination with an inability to characterize or even conceive of O'Connor's effect on her readers in ways that are not in some way malicious. In this way, Foster seems to have the opposite problem as Shinn. Having dispensed with the "Catholic implications," Foster seems happily unaware of the serious moral accusation she is unwittingly leveling at O'Connor when she says, "the exceptional and original aspect of the violence in O'Connor's fiction is found in its *manipulative relationship*

with the audience who, as one critic[1] has expressed it, may feel "cheated," not to say victimized, by the author's mocking tyranny" (260 emphasis mine). Later, Foster argues that O'Connor achieves this "by a technique of irony which relies on a skilful use of 'point of view,' permitting the author to enter her work covertly and obliquely through her characters' self-revelations" (261). And despite the rigor and critical value of Foster's formal analysis of how O'Connor's use of "point of view" continually undermines a self-congratulatory perspective from the reader, her essay admits (quite admirably) in the end to being still troubled by the questions about the function of this "violence" towards her readers:

> […] whereas the characters' illusions are punctured in order that they may arrive at a particular truth, the reader is left with no sense of having attained wisdom—there is no cathartic release of tension in these stories. It appears almost as if the author takes delight in turning on her audience a mocking vindictiveness which, while too carefully distanced to fall into the savagery of Swiftian irony (with which O'Connor has much in common) nevertheless seems intended to destroy all hopes of "comfortable" reading. O'Connor allows us the temporary illusion of privileged observation, but at

[1] Foster points to a 1960 review of *The Violent Bear it Away* in which Vivian Mercier says, "I read it with breathless attention, as one reads the short stories in Miss O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, but ultimately I felt cheated. No form of entertainment is less satisfying than a performance by a conjuror; once the show is over, the greater the conjuror's skill, the greater is one's dissatisfaction" (455). Later, Mercier characterizes O'Connor's novel as a failure to achieve, "some sort of harmony between subject matter and treatment" (456). Mercier's misguided comments are instructive here not only for their unreflective assertion that art is fundamentally about entertaining, but, more constructively, for the ways it prefigures the reasons I am reluctant to support depictions of O'Connor as ambushing her readers.

> the last she unseats our complacency and shows us that we too have been deluded. (272)

Surely both O'Connor and Sykes would agree that her stories are meant to discomfit her reader's self-assurance and complacency, but we must pause at Foster's description of this as a "mocking vindictiveness" which O'Connor delights in (perhaps an unintentional echo of John Hawkes' "meanness-pleasure paradox" (401)) and which, furthermore, leaves the reader with "no sense of having attained wisdom."[2] The aesthetic and ethical implications of imputing to O'Connor, often without any apparent negative judgment, the qualities of a deceiver, manipulator, or even bludgeoner become amplified as we observe other critical attempts to describe the nature of a reader's encounter with O'Connor.

Though, like Foster, he is adamant that a certain reader will most definitely receive a kind of wisdom, Robert Brinkmeyer emphasizes

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[2] There is perhaps no better response to Foster's conflation of wisdom and catharsis and Mercier's confusion of entertainment with art (see note 1 above) than O'Connor's own prescient and all-too apt quotation of Joseph Conrad: "If the [artist's] conscience is clear, his answer to those who in the fullness of wisdom which looks for immediate profit, demand specifically to be edified, consoled, amused; who demand to be promptly improved, or encouraged, or frightened, or shocked or charmed, must run thus: 'My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make you *see.* That—and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there, according to your deserts, encouragement, consolation, fear, charm, all you demand—and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask'" (*MM* 80). We will return to this quotation often in what follows below, but for now it is enough to temper accounts which (sometimes unwittingly) elevate the shock-value for the readers as an end itself in O'Connor's fiction.

manipulation and violence in his account of O'Connor's relationship to her readers. In his chapter on "O'Connor and Her Readers," Brinkmeyer acknowledges the catholicity of O'Connor's rejection of the abstract in favor of the concrete as a vehicle for subtly conveying mystery, but ultimately he concludes that O'Connor's "severe and radical approach to fiction and the reader stands *directly opposed* to O'Connor's less belligerent views, based on her Thomism, that art is a good in itself and that the Christian writer communicates with the reader by maintaining a fidelity to reality in order to suggest Reality" (179 emphasis mine). Brinkmeyer takes as evidence of and justification for O'Connor's "severe and radical approach" a letter to Betty Hester in which O'Connor criticizes one of Hester's short stories for being too moralistic: "You can suggest something obvious is going to happen but you cannot have it happen in a story. You can't clobber any reader while he is looking. You divert his attention, then you clobber him, and he never knows what hit him" (*HOB* 202). Here, Brinkmeyer assumes that this "clobbering" in O'Connor's work is primarily directed at a "secular audience," and thus he sees an innate tension between her "learned and Orthodox Catholicism and the narrator's fierce down-home fundamentalism" or her "evangelical impulse" (180). Elsewhere, he says,

> It seems she was driven primarily by two powerful—and frequently conflicting—urges towards the readers: a monologic rage, rooted in severe fundamentalism, to lash out at the readers and so destroy their secularism; and a desire to proceed further

> after this lashing, to goad the readers to open up to a larger dialogic vision rooted in Christian charity. (193)

For Brinkmeyer, however, this tension is ultimately aesthetically and didactically productive since "the narrator's fierce attacks on the readers," is intended to lead them to "a deeper knowledge of self by shattering their monologic intellectualism and thereby opening them up to a more profound dialogic understanding" (180). Later, Brinkmeyer defines more precisely the content of a

> […] more receptive and dialogic appreciation of the world and self. This vision sees God's presence as permeating all creation—all things and people, all voices of others (including all the voices in the multi-voiced self)—and calls for a person to embrace, understand, and adapt to these voices, all within a Christian vision. […] for the readers to achieve such a vision, O'Connor believed that they had to be first bashed about by the narrator. […] in O'Connor's relationship with her readers the means are monologic but the end is dialogic. (188)

How such a modified Bakhtinian distinction might play out in a literary interpretation is especially striking in Brinkmeyer's concluding remarks regarding the *The Violent Bear it Away*: "As Tarwater is shocked into a larger Christian vision by his rape, so too does the narrator hope the reader[s] will be

by their own shocking ravishment that reveals the blindness and demonism of their own intellectualism" (192).[3]

Whatever else we might say about the merits or final coherence of the distinctions Brinkmeyer makes between "fundamentalist" evangelism (the monologic) and the "openness" of a more receptive Christian vision (the dialogic), here, at least, his argument seems entirely untroubled by the prospect of condoning that which it explicitly condemns. He does not seem to be the least bit reluctant to draw on violent metaphors as he describes over and again how O'Connor "clobbers" her readers or "bashes" them over the head, while at the same time suggesting that the vision her readers should receive rejects precisely the kind of intellectual perspective which would permit such a clobbering, even if only in a rhetorical sense. Despite Brinkmeyer's claim, there is indeed an irresolvable conflict between means and end.

Furthermore, he does not appear to be concerned about what his language might impute to O'Connor herself as author and perpetrator of such rhetorical violence when he says she rages at, lashes out at, or ravishes her readers. In so doing, Brinkmeyer unwittingly justifies the kind of violence which could murder

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[3] This is, essentially, the same logic Richard Kane follows in his essay on "Positive Destruction" in Flannery O'Connor: "The fiction of Flannery O'Connor also suggests that destruction can be positive, that violence can instruct, and that evil may be the agent of good. Her stories often seem poised between two worlds: one filled with various rational answers to the problem of man's existence, the other composed of mystery and the irrational" (46).

an entire family, drown a mentally-disabled child, or even drug and rape a teenager. His notion that there is indeed an analogous relationship between the reader and the characters of O'Connor's stories is consonant with Sykes' claims and ultimately O'Connor's own assessment, though it needs to be argued for with greater precision and caution. No doubt a good place to start would be with Brinkmeyer's assertion that O'Connor's means of communicating her aesthetic vision (at least this aspect of it) was "directly opposed" to her Catholicism—though this also requires rearticulating what her "means" actually was. And certainly O'Connor's advice to Hester to clobber her distracted readers offers ample vindication of the language Brinkmeyer employs—though, again, one could hope for a greater sensitivity to the humor intended and context of O'Connor's exaggerated admonition in her personal letter to a friend. What is most important for the purposes of this project, however, is that we begin to see the drastic implications (both aesthetic and ethical) of too-readily embracing an account of an author's impact on her readers that ignores or even justifies the use of deceit and genuine violence.

But perhaps there is no better example of the disastrous conclusions that can be reached when we fail to do so than Ruthann Johansen's argument in *The Narrative Secret of Flannery O'Connor.* In it, Johansen argues that O'Connor's stories move us closer to the "mystery or secrecy" of not only O'Connor's work

but of narratives in general by disrupting or disorienting our notions of the Self and "by precipitating encounters between the unlikely and the upright, the unsuspecting and the skeptical, the unconscious and consciousness, the divine and the human" (7). Unlike Sykes's version of "precipitating encounters," however, for Johansen, this "device" can best be described through recourse to the Jungian archetype of the Trickster, an image which depicts the way O'Connor as artist "informs people of their common origins and of the mutual dependence among human beings and between the human and the divine" (9). Distant as we moderns are from "the religious myths and allusions" in O'Connor, Johansen contends that the "tricksteresque activity" of her narratives pushes the reader "into a vision of reality that, without both darkness and light, evil and goodness, the fall and redemption, is otherwise partial and prone to distortion from repressed and unmediated violence" (8). Thus, and here is the crucial turn,

> the *religious* secret of O'Connor's narratives, revealed in shimmering environments where narration and incarnation meet, is that both good and evil, the ideal and its grotesque distortions, peace and violence, God and Satan, the human and the divine exist together as *an original and sacred unity*." (9 emphasis mine)

There can be no doubt that, wary as she was of Jung's teachings (partly because she saw in it so much that was commendable), O'Connor would be very troubled by the ease with which Johansen's Gnostic dualism collapses into a kind

of metaphysical monism and, more significantly, by the aesthetic implications this would have for her life's work. Indeed, as the rest of this dissertation seeks to show, Johansen's vision of "reality"— one in which evil is necessary for, indeed intrinsic to, the good—is precisely the kind which O'Connor's art—in its form as well as content, even in the very consideration of itself as "art"—was fighting against. As Sykes's work begins to help us see, only through an orthodox understanding of the doctrines of Creation, the Incarnation, the Atonement, and, I would add, the Trinity can the "strange encounters with the Incarnation" that Johansen finds in O'Connor's fiction make any real aesthetic, theological, or ethical sense. To reach such an understanding, however, it is essential that we articulate an understanding of O'Connor's relationship to her readers that does not also, if unwittingly, imply the fundamental, intrinsic necessity of evil. Doing so, I have been suggesting, has consequences not only for the judgments we make concerning O'Connor as an artist, but also for the interpretive practices and habits we allow to shape us as readers.

Such concerns clearly pervade the collection of essays recently published in *Flannery O'Connor in the Age of Terrorism* (2010). As the introduction to the volume makes clear, in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks and America's seemingly endless involvement in wars and global conflict, the need to speak clearly against easy justifications of inflicting pain serves as the explicit impetus for a renewed

attempt to make sense of the violence in O'Connor's fiction. In the opening essay on "O'Connor and the Menace of Apocalyptic Terrorism," Anthony Di Renzo responds to O'Connor's admission that a "Christian novelist […] may well be forced to use more violent means to get his vision across […]" by quoting approvingly Claire Katz's charge that O'Connor "unleashes 'a whirlwind of destructive forces more profound than her Christian theme would seem to justify—murder, rape, mutilation—for ostensibly religious purposes." Di Renzo then concludes,

> Religious violence is not simply a 'rhetoric demanded by a secular audience'; it expresses, at least partly, Flannery O'Connor's vision and values. If O'Connor studies is to remain vital, relevant, and honest, it must rethink fundamental questions about the violent fundamentalism at the heart of O'Connor's work. To do so, we must confront the shadow of orthodox Christianity and the potential madness in apocalyptic mysticism—two things we have denied or explained away for the past forty years. (5)

For his part, Di Renzo seeks to prove that "the same eschatology, the same war between terrorism and counterterrorism [that occurred in the "ancient controversy surrounding the Book of Revelation's inclusion in the Bible"] also informs Flannery O'Connor's harrowing fiction" (6). Somewhat surprisingly, however, despite the parallels he draws between "fundamentalist" (i.e. literal) interpretations of the Book of Revelation and O'Connor's characters, he never fully explores the implications of his argument in terms of violence inflicted on O'Connor's readers. Instead, he must be content to offer finally a declaration

that feels a bit too facile and would appear to be at odds with the concerns about religious rhetoric that prompted his accusation in the first place. "Love" he assures, "is the violence that bears away the Kingdom of Heaven" (21).[4]

Much more usefully, in "The Violence of Technique and the Technique of Violence" Christina Bieber Lake describes "three types of violence that O'Connor was concerned with or could be accused of in some way":

> First, there is what could be called "God permitted" violence against the characters in most of O'Connor's plots. The Misfit murders a whole family; a bull gores a woman to death; a young prophet is raped by a sexual predator; and so on. Second, there is what could be called the writer's violence against her readers, whereby violence occurs in the effort get people to pay attention. I am currently calling this O'Connor's 'shock and awe'[5] campaign, and it is best typified by her use of the grotesque as an assault on the readers' expectations. Third, there is the possibility of the

[4] Silver's review of this collection in *The Southern Literary Journal* clearly values the contributions of the individual essays differently than I do, especially Di Renzo's essay, but it nonetheless reinforces the case that readers remain skeptical of the existing attempts to account for the violence in O'Connor's work: the "abiding love [many of these readers have for O'Connor's craft] sometimes stiffens into apologia in the wake of 9/11: disturbing questions are occasionally acknowledged, unearthed, and promptly side-stepped in the interest of salvaging and defending the power of O'Connor's stories and the saving grace of her violence" (148). "[R]ather than exploring O'Connor's violence in the age of terrorism," Silver explains, "most of these essays opt instead to apply the author's argument with 1950's American culture to post-9/11 America, preserving the Christian orthodox fly in 1950's secular amber" (149).

[5] Though I too, independently of Lake's work, had thought of this phrase in connection to O'Connor's work, recognizing my own impulse in another revealed again the ease with which such catchphrases can infiltrate and then dull our sensibilities to the real consequences of violence, whether or not they have been adequately justified in the interest of Nation. This experience has prompted me to avoid employing the term again in an attempt to perhaps pay closer attention to the ways in which descriptors of violence and destruction can become so quickly homogenized and rendered harmless (i.e. beyond suspicion) by their easy assimilation into all spheres of dialogue.

> writer's violence against the truth for the particular individuality and freedom of her characters. This type of violence O'Connor clearly wanted to avoid and used the grotesque in part in an effort to do so. (27)

Regarding this third violence, Lake's astute comparison of O'Connor's technical achievements in "The Crop" and "Parker's Back" offers an elegant argument against any proposition that O'Connor, at her best, violated the terms of her art by merely "using" her characters as a veiled form of Christian apologetics. Instead, Lake argues, O'Connor's art retains its integrity as art precisely because it refuses to "use" her characters "to get a point across," a refusal that is both prompted and enabled by O'Connor's Christianity. But does O'Connor ever refuse to "use" or enact violence upon her *readers*, even in an attempt to get their attention? That is, does O'Connor finally reject or even need to reject the second form of violence Lake describes? And how might we then make sense, aesthetically and theologically, of the "God permitted" form of violence Lake alludes to, especially in light of Ivan Karamazov's damning and all too relevant objection? Here, Lake ultimately leaves these questions unanswered, though I think her work hints at a way forward in so far that it assumes a coherence between O'Connor's aesthetic framework and her refusal to enact a fundamental violence. What is still needed, however, is a similarly coherent articulation of O'Connor's aesthetic and theological framework that can conceive of the means and ends of the impact of O'Connor's art on its audience

without, perhaps unwittingly, undermining or contradicting itself through its recourse to language of subterfuge and manipulation.

Towards an Aesthetic Whose Persuasion Is the Form of Peace: The Hermeneutical Implications of Beauty in David B. Hart

Given the obvious challenges one faces in characterizing O'Connor's relationship to her readers, Betty Hester's impulse to label O'Connor a fascist becomes fairly understandable—perhaps more comprehensible than even O'Connor allows. If, after all, even the richest discussions of O'Connor's relationship to her reader must make recourse to the language of deceit and destruction, what all of this may amount to is simply further evidence that Derrida was right: "To name, to give names that it will on occasion be forbidden to pronounce, such is the originary violence of language which consists in inscribing within a difference, in classifying, in suspending the vocative absolute" (112).

Against such a bleak and ultimately nihilistic assessment of aesthetics and the nature of truth, however, stands the work of Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. His work, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth,* offers an opportunity to clarify and better articulate O'Connor's understanding of what is required to apprehend and appreciate art properly in general, and what it means to rightly read a text in particular. Hart's central conviction is that

> Christ is a persuasion, a form evoking desire, and the whole force of the gospel depends upon the assumption that *this persuasion is also peace*: that the desire awakened by the shape of Christ and his church is one truly reborn as *agape,* rather than merely the way in which a lesser force succumbs to a greater, as an episode in the endless epic of power. (3 emphasis mine)

Rejecting a narrative that "finds the grammar of violence inscribed upon the foundation stone of every institution and hidden within the syntax of every rhetoric," Hart instead characterizes Christian thought as essentially making the claim "that within history a way of reconciliation has been opened up that leads beyond, and ultimately overcomes, all violence." To become a rhetoric of peace, a "form evoking desire" rather than coercion, however, Christian truth-claims must appeal to beauty, or rather, must recognize that "beauty belongs already to the Christian narrative" (4). For Hart,

> What Christian thought offers the world is not a set of "rational" arguments that (suppressing certain of their premises) force assent from others by leaving them, like the interlocutors of Socrates, at a loss for words; rather it stands before the world principally with the story it tells concerning God and creation, the form of Christ, the loveliness of the practice of Christian charity—and the rhetorical richness of its idiom. Making its appeal first to the eye and heart, as the only way it may "command" assent, the church cannot separate truth from rhetoric, or from beauty. (4)

It is precisely this assumption that "the Christian tradition embraces an understanding of beauty unique to itself," (4) that I argue can bring readers to a deeper appreciation of O'Connor's indebtedness to and departure from a modernist or New Critical aesthetic. More importantly, it offers, or rather,

reminds us of a language and a grammar that can conceive of art's influence on its audience without making recourse to an essential, inevitable violence. For our purposes here, Hart's work suggests that a way to account for the "tension" between O'Connor's unambiguous motives (Sykes: "to render transparent scenes of divine mystery ordinarily invisible to world-weary modern eyes") and the essential ambiguity of her medium (what Sykes calls a "conflict between the dramatic and the didactic" (17)), is not a deeper appreciation of violence, but rather a recovery of what Hart calls the "suasive loveliness" of beauty essential to the Christian story (5). That is, before we can even conceive of there being no final contradiction between O'Connor's message and her artistic medium, perhaps what we need most is to hear again the possibility of a narrative, a notion of truth and goodness ineluctably inscribed by, in and with beauty, whose grammar permits only of peace.

Such an account of beauty does not, I argue, simply ignore or diminish the reality of violence occurring within O'Connor's stories, nor does it outright reject O'Connor's own claims that the resultant suffering (either for her characters or her audience) may in some sense be redemptive. What it does offer us as we seek to articulate both O'Connor's hermeneutical framework (her practice as much as her theory) and subsequently the interpretive posture she seems to hope to provoke in her readers is 1) a language—a grammar—for re-conceiving the

possibility of an art which affirms the true and the good without violence or coercion and 2) a vision for how the recipients of such an art might approach it without themselves also enacting a violence upon the work itself or those in whom, so to speak, the work works. If, as Sykes and so many others contend, the reader's suffering can in fact be redemptive and revelatory, it must be so only as a result of an encounter with, not actual violence, but beauty: a beauty which rather than simply destroy or exclude that which rejects it, can in fact heal it; a beauty, as Hart says, "seen in the form of a slave, revealed in a particular shape whose place in time and space is determinative of every other truth, every other beauty" (28). If indeed Hart can say that "all that theology says of the triune life of God, the gratuity of creation, the incarnation of the Word, and the salvation of the world makes room for—indeed depends upon—a thought, and a narrative, of the beautiful" (16), and Sykes is right in pointing to the centrality of the doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, Atonement, then we must also admit—perhaps precisely because such a conclusion is not immediately obvious—that "beauty is a category indispensable" to O'Connor's thought.

Beyond legitimizing O'Connor's understanding of her vocation as an artist and a Christian without contradiction, Hart's restitution of aesthetics as being indispensable, indeed intrinsic, to the work of Christian theology offers a re-appreciation of beauty that echoes, illuminates and clarifies O'Connor's own

attempts to explain not only *what* her art is but *why* it so often affects its readers in ways they simply cannot ignore. In what follows, then, I suggest that Hart's six-fold "general 'thematics'" of beauty can offer us a useful synthesis of the aesthetic presuppositions that animated O'Connor's art and that she consistently sought to articulate and refine throughout her career. And while clearly the implications of and presumed interlocutors for Hart's polemic reach much further than the scope of this present work, we may, without ourselves enacting a violence towards either Hart's or O'Connor's work, look to these introductory distinctions as a kind of primer on a way of thinking and speaking that rightly locates the aesthetic and theological concerns pertinent to interpretation of O'Connor's fiction in a richer, truly freeing and nonviolent appreciation of the beautiful. Ultimately, such an appreciation will enable us—perhaps even require us—to articulate a refined conception of desire, will, and suffering, particularly as they relate to interpretive acts, without also unwittingly proclaiming violence as "originary" and inscribed "within the syntax of every rhetoric." We shall explore in much greater detail the implications of Hart's six-fold characterization of beauty for O'Connor's hermeneutical framework in the chapters that follow, but first, a basic introduction to the possibilities he proposes seems worth our while.

1. "Beauty is Objective." For Hart, beauty's objectivity does not imply the existence of a particular, distinguishable quality or object that in some way makes beauty tangible, accessible or universally definable. "Objective" in this case, does not mean empirically verifiable or open to a classification which proposes to be comprehensible apart from the individual perspective. Rather, it suggests that

> […] beauty *possesses a phenomenal priority*, an indefectible precedence over whatever response it evokes; it appears on the vastest of scales and on the most minute, at once familiar and strange, near and remote; attempts to make it obedient to a particular semantics inevitably fail and expand uncontrollably into an ever more inexact prolixity. […T]he beautiful is not a fiction of desire, nor is its nature exhausted by a phenomenology of pleasure: it can be recognized in despite of desire, or as that toward which desire must be cultivated. (17 emphasis mine)

Thus, at the risk of trading in clichés, to say that beauty is objective is to reject the idea that beauty is discovered by and contained in the eye of the beholder, though we might also say that a true apprehension of the beautiful, beauty's genuine presence "within" the eye of the beholder, is evidenced by the continual cultivation of a desire for the beautiful. But beauty's objectivity implies that it is also always a gift, "an overwhelming givenness […] discovered in astonishment, in an awareness of something fortuitous, adventitious, essentially indescribable." Beauty then, says Hart, can be "known only in the moment of response, from the

position of one already addressed and able now only to reply" (17). In theological terms, the beautiful thus shows God's

> […] glory to be not only holy, powerful, immense, and righteous, but also good and desirable, a gift graciously shared; and shows also, perhaps, the appeal—the pleasingness—of creation to God. In the beautiful God's glory is revealed as *something communicable and intrinsically delightful, as including the creature in its ends, and as completely worthy of love.* What God's glory necessitates and commands, beauty shows also to be gracious and inviting; […] God's ordinance is also ordonnance, so to speak. (17 emphasis mine)

That the beautiful is precisely that which *compels* or *persuades*, not by forcing itself upon its audience's good sense or ability to comprehend its reasonableness but rather by appealing to its own intrinsic delightfulness—the experience of which can only be described as a gift or an invitation—is clearly a crucial first step in Hart's attempt to articulate the possibility of a form of rhetoric which is non-violent. It is also, I would add, a key proposition which enables us to consider the possibility of an art which compels or persuades without recourse to violence, either towards itself as a thing made, its subject matter, or its audience. As something "known only in the moment of response, from the position of one already addressed and able now only to reply," beauty is neither bound by the subjective experience nor can it be known propositionally and therefore rejected or employed as a tool or weapon. Rather, it is perhaps something like what O'Connor means when she says, "when I read [Henry]

James I feel something happening to me, in slow motion but happening nevertheless" (*HOB* 96). One's reply to beauty is thus not simply compelled by the force of rational assent (though neither is the reply "irrational") but by the claims made upon the apprehender as one already known or apprehended in light of beauty itself.

Indeed, such a description of art might serve as the nexus between the Thomistic insistence that art's concern is only for "the good of that which is made" and James' dictum to "show not tell." And clearly, the New Critics would readily sympathize with much of Hart's insistence that beauty is objective, our apprehension of which is ultimately not dependent on the audience's own knowledge of the author's history or context of the work. The crucial difference, however, is that for Hart—and, I would argue, the aesthetic framework O'Connor inherits from the Catholic Church—beauty's persuasion must ultimately enact a kind of violence if it is understood apart from the Christian doctrines of Creation, Incarnation, Atonement, and the Trinity. For, if we exclude the possibility that an artist creates by participating analogously in the infinite, overflowing generosity of God's *perichoresis* ("a dynamic coinherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared regard, delight, fellowship, feasting, and joy" [155]), we must eventually come to characterize artistic creation as self-serving, self-preserving, and wholly dependent on some

parasitic, usurping, or reductive diminishment of an other. Only in the context of the infinite, triune God, can self-delight be considered a gift and creation truly gratuitous:

> The freedom of God from ontic determination is the ground of creation's goodness: precisely because creation is uncompelled, unnecessary, and finally other than that dynamic life of coinherent love whereby God is God, it can reveal how God is the God he is; precisely because creation reflects the divine life, which is one of delight and fellowship and love; [...] in being the object of God's love without any cause but the generosity of that love, creation reflects in its beauty that eternal delight that is the divine *perichoresis* and that obeys no necessity but divine love itself. (158)

Consequently, for Hart, beauty is "analogical" in two ways: "in the simple analytical sense, that whatever 'beauty' means is grasped only by analogy," and in the sense that beauty "indwells the analogical relationship of all things, each to the other, as a measure of their involvement with one another." From a Christian understanding, then, beauty "refers most properly to a relationship of donation and transfiguration, a handing over and return of the riches of being" (18). Such a conception of beauty's objectivity as being primarily relational—as a giving that changes the recipient without violence and is then returned as yet another witness of the original wholeness without implying the irrelevance of that unique, though unnecessary exchange—rightly points towards the centrality of the doctrine of the Trinity in coherently formulating not just theological, but aesthetic declarations of peace.

2. "*Beauty is the True Form of Distance*." Intrinsic to this relationship of donation and transfiguration, therefore, must be the possibility that "beauty does not merely adorn an alien space, or cross the distance as a wayfarer, but is the true form of that distance, constituting it, as the grammar of difference." In fact, for Hart,

> […] the presence of distance within the beautiful […] *provides the essential logic of theological aesthetics*: one that does not interpret all distance as an original absence, or as the distance of differentiation's heterogeneous and violent forces, but that sees in distance, and in all the series and intervals that dwell in it, the possibility of peaceful analogies and representations that neither falsify nor constrain the object of regard. (18 emphasis mine)

Readers familiar with O'Connor should already begin to hear echoes of her famous defense of the aesthetic means and merits of the grotesque, wherein she declares that the novelist, like a prophet, "is a realist of distances." For O'Connor, as for Hart, art does not merely transcend the "point" in the concrete in order to apprehend another "point not visible to the naked eye," but rather has the prophetic habit of "seeing near things with their extension of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up" (*CW* 817).

And precisely because, as Hart says, "distance is originally the gift of the beautiful—rather than the featureless sublimity of will, or force, or *difference*, or the ontological Nothing," not only is the concrete, the "near thing," deserving of God's (or the artist's) pleasure, but infinity need not be understood as an

absolute force or metaphysics threatening to overwhelm particularity. Such is the crucial difference between O'Connor's view and a view like Johannsen's which must ultimately conclude that "that both good and evil, the ideal and its grotesque distortions, peace and violence, God and Satan, the human and the divine exist together as *an original and sacred unity*" (9). On the contrary, to say as Hart does that beauty is the true form of distance, is to admit simultaneously that beauty is "situated in perspectives, vantages, points of departure," and yet "is never fixed, contained, exhausted, or mastered" (19). In Hart's rejection of that which would seek to reduce difference or collapse all distance and in his proposition that, in fact, beauty alone refuses to constrain the transcendent (thereby giving the immanent its true form), one can also begin to sense a certain kinship with O'Connor's insistence in her essays and letters that "Fiction is the concrete expression of mystery—mystery that is lived" (*HOB* 144). Or, as she says elsewhere,

> Dogma can in no way limit a limitless God. The person outside the Church attaches a different meaning to it than the person in. For me a dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind. (*HOB* 91)

How O'Connor came to understand this "restriction"-enabled freedom (a proper example of paradox) and exactly what O'Connor means by it is a central concern of chapter three. For now, it is enough to begin suggesting that both her notion

of the artist as a visionary of distances and her aesthetically-enabling contention that dogma actually *preserves* mystery resonate with Hart's conception of the beautiful as a non-violent persuasion of peace.

3. "Beauty Evokes Desire." Having hinted at its relation to beauty in the first of his premises, Hart reemphasizes the place of desire in order to reject the notion that beauty is "simply the invention of a fecund, unpremised, spontaneous exuberance of will, a desire that preexists and predisposes the object of its velleity or appetite." Instead, Hart argues, beauty "precedes and elicits desire, supplicates and commands it (often in vain), and gives shape to the will that receives it" (19). Again, the emphasis here is on the precedence or objectivity of beauty, as something given to and not defined by the observer, something which forms and gives life rather than simply confirms the apprehender's own capricious predilections.

But this is not to suggest a gift given *in contradiction* to one's desire or worse, "some ideally disinterested and dispirited state of contemplation." Rather, beauty evokes "genuine" desire—"though not a coarse, impoverished desire to consume and dispose, but a desire made full at a distance, dwelling alongside what is loved and possessed in the intimacy of dispossession" (19). In fact, for Hart, this unacknowledged desire to "consume and dispose" characterizes modern, Kantian assumptions that the aesthetic and ethical must

remain *disinterested*. On the contrary, a Christian conception sees desire as integral to both the ethical and the aesthetic:

> It is the pleasingness of the other's otherness, the goodness that God sees in creation, that wakes desire to what it must affirm and what it must not violate, and shows love the measure of charitable detachment that must temper its elations; it is only in desire that the beautiful is known and its invitation heard. Here Christian thought learns something, perhaps, of how the trinitarian love of God—and the love God requires of creatures—is eros and agape at once: a desire for others that delights in the distance of others. (20)[6]

Here too, one begins to hear a certain resonance between Hart's insistence on the *interestedness* of beauty and O'Connor's sympathies with a certain kind of fundamentalism: from her admission to John Lynch that "If I were not a Catholic, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything" (*CW* 966); or her sense that a novelist "will feel a good deal more kinship with backwoods prophets and shouting fundamentalists than he will with those politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personality development" (*CW* 859); to her astute indictment that a

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[6] In his essay on "Flannery O'Connor, Benedict XVI, and the Divine Eros," Ralph Wood uses Pope Benedict's encyclical *"Deus Caritas Est"* to argue that O'Connor's "work has a deep congruence with the theology of Benedict XVI and its claim that the natural order is never autonomous but always and already graced. Divine love is not only agape, therefore, but also eros: God is not only the self-giving Beloved but also the other-pursuing Lover." (36) Besides validating the connections I see between O'Connor and Hart's notion of beauty, Wood's essay indirectly helps to confirm that this is a deeply Christian view, shared by both Catholics and Orthodox alike.

dangerous tendency for an artist with a "religious view of the world" will be to "consider [creating art] two operations instead of one," the consequence of which is that "Judgment will be separated from vision; nature from grace; and reason from the imagination" (*CW* 864). For O'Connor, as with Hart, a disinterested distancing which divorces religious assumptions from one's notion of the real, reason from the imagination, or judgment from vision, enables no true desire or intimacy, but rather only a kind of "politeness" which in the end speaks with violence. One thinks here of Mrs. May, Mr. Sheppard, and Rayber as exemplars *par excellence* whose "politeness" is quite literally lethal.

Furthermore, Hart's important qualification that desire, nonetheless, "must also be cultivated," aptly summarizes a recurring concern throughout O'Connor's prose to help her audiences cultivate a taste for art and expand their vision. Hart might be speaking for O'Connor herself when he admits,

> […] the beautiful does not always immediately commend itself to every taste: Christ's beauty, like that of Isaiah's suffering servant, is not expressed in vacuous comeliness or shadowless glamour, but calls for a love that is charitable, that is not dismayed by distance or mystery, and that can repent of its failure to see. This is to acquire what Augustine calls a taste for the beauty of God (*Soliloquia* 1.3-14). Once this taste is learned, divine beauty, as Gregory of Nyssa says, inflames desire, drawing one on into an endless *epektasis*, a stretching out toward an ever greater embrace of divine glory (20).

Besides the obvious resonances with O'Connor's defense of the "grotesque" or "distortion" as a way of helping her readers to see, of cultivating,

as it were, their taste for mystery, one might also think here of the differences between Hazel Motes and his landlady at the end of *Wise Blood*. After Motes blinds himself, Mrs. Flood tries in vain to make sense of his horrifying action: "Perhaps Mr. Motes was only being ugly, for what possible reason could a person have for wanting to destroy their sight? A woman like her, who was so clear-sighted, could never stand to be blind" (*CW* 119). And yet, the reader senses (usually with a great deal of sympathy) that her notion of beauty does not—indeed, cannot—extend beyond "vacuous comeliness or shadowless glamour." Quite literally, Motes' asceticism presents an affront to Mrs. Flood's aesthetic sensibilities. She has, we might say, no "taste" for Motes' own repentance of his failure to see, though perhaps the novel's last line suggests that in the end, through Motes' "ugliness" and shadows, she too is nearing *epektasis*: "She sat staring with her eyes shut, into his eyes, and felt as if she had finally got to the beginning of something she couldn't begin[…]" (*CW* 131). Examples abound of other characters who, as O'Connor's stories draw to a close, are often quite literally, "stretching out toward an ever greater embrace of divine glory." In the last two chapters we will return again to two characters, O.E. Parker and Francis Tarwater, whose encounter with beauty in the terms Hart proposes has cultivated in them an insatiable desire for "the bleeding stinking mad shadow of Jesus" (*CW* 389, 465). For now, it is enough to simply say again, that if we, as

readers, cannot also conceive of this shadow as beautiful, as a "desire for others which delights in the distance of otherness," we must ultimately pronounce this bleeding, stinking, madness and the suffering it provokes or the way it shapes the individual will to be violent.

4. "Beauty Crosses Boundaries" For Hart, "Beauty traverses being oblivious of the boundaries that divide ideal from real, transcendent from immanent, supernatural from natural, pleasing from profound—even, perhaps, nature from grace" (20). The implications for such a description of beauty are two-fold. On the one hand, it again points to the objective precedence of beauty which refuses at every turn to be held captive by our subjective limitations: "Beauty defies our distinctions, calls them into question, and manifests what shows itself despite them: God's glory" (20). As a perpetual boundary-crosser, beauty thus confounds our attempts to, as it were, bottle it up, frame it in, or bind it between the dust- jacket covers of a book.

O'Connor's comments about the artist's responsibility to embody Mystery clearly echo Hart's description of beauty as eluding our attempts to circumscribe it: "The fiction writer presents mystery through manners, grace through nature, but when he finishes there always has to be left over that sense of Mystery which cannot be accounted for by any human formula" (*MM* 152). Or, take for another

example, her well known comment about the moment which indicates the "real heart" of a story:

> This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity. The action or gesture I'm talking about would have to be on the anagogical level, that is, the level which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery. (*MM* 111)

Indeed, given Hart's account, one might even say that the specific moment O'Connor is here referring to, the moment just before the Misfit shoots the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," is beautiful precisely because it crosses boundaries on so many levels. O'Connor also makes it clear, however, that the responsibility also extends to the reader who wishes to truly apprehend beauty:

> A story really isn't any good unless it successfully resists paraphrase, unless it hangs on and expands in the mind. Properly, you analyze to enjoy, but it's equally true that to analyze with any discrimination, you have to have enjoyed already, and I think that the best reason to hear a story read is that it should stimulate that primary enjoyment. (*MM* 108)

O'Connor's criteria for a "good" story as resisting paraphrase and ever-expanding is widely acknowledged in the criticism and clearly accords with Hart's attempt to reinstate beauty as a central category, along with the true and

the good, for theology. Far less acknowledged, however, is O'Connor's repeated insistence that encounters with beauty, even those that occur in the realm of the carnival or the grotesque, both provoke and are increased by joy. For Hart, such joy or delighted pleasure in a "vision of what is other than oneself," beauty's boundary-crossing hospitality, constitutes its fundamental rejection and redemption of violence—even that violence which foolishly claims to have mastered beauty's "unmasterable excess."

On the other hand, to acknowledge beauty's indifference towards boundaries, its "prodigality, its defiance of so many orderly demarcations," is not to deny beauty's distance-granting gift (as in the second "thematic" above), for one's response to beauty is always a product of beauty having *always already* crossed a boundary (without also undermining difference or committing violence): "it is in the delighted vision of what is other than oneself—difference, created by the God who differentiates, pleasing in the eyes of the God who takes pleasure—that one is moved to affirm that otherness, to cherish and respond to it." As an invocation of God's glory, beauty is thus the ultimate expression of hospitality:

> […] the beautiful, uniquely, displays the dynamic involvement of the infinite and the finite, the unmasterable excess contained in the object of beauty, the infinite's hospitality to the finite. […] Beauty crosses every boundary, traverses ever series, and so manifests the God who transcends every division—including, again, that between the transcendent and the immanent. (21)

As Hart explains later in his work, because beauty's boundary crossing is in fact, "a manifestation of the one eternal act by which God is God," a Christian approach to art, so long as it does not confuse beauty with abasement and vulgarity, "must follow the path of beauty outward into the world, even into states of privation." Because God himself has ventured "into the godless," a Christian notion of beauty does not "simply ascend," but "finds the beautiful in the entire scope of the divine life, even as it proceeds 'downward' into utter inanition" (323).

On this point also, one should hear not only O'Connor's description of the novelist as a "realist of distances," but her repeated assertions that her faith permitted, even demanded, that she not shy away from whatever she could see as a novelist: "The Catholic fiction writer is entirely free to observe. […] He feels perfectly free to look at the [universe] we already have and to show exactly what he sees" (*MM* 178). Thus, to suggest O'Connor's work is ultimately provoked by and striving after beauty, is not in any way to suggest that it must ignore the darkness, ugliness, or even the violence which she sees. For it is in the very nature or motion of beauty itself, or as Hart says, "the eternal act by which God is God," to go towards all things, even that which explicitly rejects it. According to this criterion, O'Connor's work is not simply beautiful in spite of the ugliness,

but rather, only because O'Connor's work is beautiful can it, indeed must it, go forth into the "utter inanition" and "godlessness."

5. "Beauty's Authority, Within Theology, Guards Against Gnosticism."

O'Connor's writings make it abundantly clear that she, like Hart, would also say that

> the gnostic impulse belongs not only to antiquity: it has haunted every age of theology as a persistent secret temptation. Wherever theology seeks to soothe those who are offended by the particularity of Christ, or struggles to extract a universally valid wisdom from the parochialism of the Gospels, a gnosis begins to take shape at the expense of the Christian *kerygma.* (22)

O'Connor's direct target, however, usually involves writers of "religious" fiction, or worse yet, their readers:

> If the average Catholic reader could be tracked down through the swamps of letter-to-the-editor and other places where he momentarily reveals himself, he would be found to be more of a Manichean than the church permits. By separating nature and grace as much as possible, he has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize nature in literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene. (*MM* 147)

In fact, the entirety of O'Connor's essay on "The Church and the Fiction Writer" can be thought of as furthering the thesis that good art is, by definition, that which confronts our persistent, secret temptation towards Gnosticism. "Fiction, made according to its own laws," O'Connor concludes, "is an antidote to [the tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual], for it renews our knowledge that

we live in the mystery from which we draw our abstractions" (*MM* 152). Good reading, therefore, implies in some sense a surrender to beauty. But it is precisely because this surrender is to something which does not compartmentalize or seek to merely transcend the visible, concrete, and material that it can be a persuasion that permits only of peace.

For Hart, acknowledging Gnosticism's affront to beauty is crucial because not only does beauty show "creation to be the real theater of divine glory—good, gracious, lovely, and desirable, participating in God's splendor," but it also

> shows the world to be unnecessary, an expression of divine glory that is free, framed for God's pleasure, and so neither a defining moment in the consciousness of God nor the consequence of some defect or fall within the divine. Opposed to the private illumination of the *pneumatikos* and the sad remoteness of the call that issues from the alien god is creation's open and overwhelming declaration of God's glory, the beauty that fills and upholds heavens and earth, *the divine goodness that expresses itself in light, flesh, and form*. (21 emphasis mine)

The implications of such statements for our questions concerning the *imitatio Christi* and the creation or apprehension of art are many and will be taken up again in the chapters that follow. For now, it may be enough to simply observe that Sykes' astute remarks concerning the centrality of the doctrines of the Incarnation ("role of the body in salvation"), Creation ("understanding of evil as privation of good"), and the Atonement ("the value of human suffering") also depend on the Gnosticism-guarding quality that Hart attributes to beauty. And

making this aesthetic connection is essential for addressing those who, like Frederick Asals, conclude that O'Connor herself, despite her protests to the contrary, is in formal terms a Manichean.[7]

Furthermore, because Hart's understanding of beauty also includes, in fact begins with, the doctrine of the Trinity, we may take Sykes' proposition a step further to claim that Christ is the *form* of beauty and the message he proclaims is peace. Indeed, as we shall discover in the chapter following, it is finally the doctrine of the Trinity which offers the model for and corrective to our account of "readerly violence," for among its many implications is the proclamation that neither the revelation nor the reception of beauty can be considered intrinsically violent. Only within such a context, I argue, can we coherently defend the thesis that if O'Connor indeed precipitates an act of reading that is itself an *imitatio crucis*, it is as a result of an encounter with beauty, not violence. Such an account would suggest both that we are *read by* Christ whose particularity reveals our own particularity to be good and pleasing (the Manichean abstraction of which would certainly constitute a violence), and that we *read like* Christ in so far that we resist our violent tendency to inflict rather

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[7] See Asals' *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*. Athens, GA: UG Press, 1982.

than endure suffering, divorce spirit from body, and proclaim evil as inevitable.[8] Christ thus becomes both the form we discern in all expressions of the beautiful and the example to which we conform as we are transformed by the "unmasterable excess" of love present within the dynamic coinherence of the persons of the Trinity. In a way, to say so is to simply echo, as O'Connor often did, Aquinas's crucial declaration: *Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit* ("Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it"). It is also, as we shall see, to properly acknowledge the will and desire as the loci of true freedom.

Before moving on to the sixth and final thematic, however, it might be useful to address an apparent discrepancy between Hart and O'Connor which clearly bears on the point that follows. Quoting Bultmann's gnostic assertion that "The idea of the beautiful is of no significance in forming the life of Christian faith, which sees in the beautiful the temptation of a false transfiguration of the world which distracts the gaze from 'beyond,'" Hart is troubled by an

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[8] On several levels O'Connor's response (Dec. 1958) to Cecil Dawkins' criticism of the Catholic church supports this point: "The Holy Spirit very rarely shows Himself on the surface of anything. You are asking that man return at once to the state God created him in, [sic] you are leaving out the terrible radical human pride that causes death. Christ was crucified on earth and the Church is crucified in time, and the Church is crucified by all of us, by her members most particularly because she is a Church of sinners. […] All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful. Priests resist it as well as others. To have the Church be what you want it to be would require the continuous miraculous meddling of God in human affairs, whereas it is our dignity that we are allowed more or less to get on with those graces that come through faith and the sacraments and which work though our human nature. We can't understand this but we can't reject it without rejecting life." (*CW* 1084)

unreflective tendency "to plumb the 'depths of reality' rather than properly to grasp its surface, as the fabric in which the glory of God is given marvelous, various and motile expression" (24). Hart's conclusion that "theology should take its lead from the 'inauthenticity' of beauty, its superficiality, its exclusive dwelling in the intensity of surfaces" (24) might, then, appear at first glance to conflict with O'Connor's claim that "The Southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets" (*MM* 45). However, what even a cursory survey reveals is that for O'Connor the surface is in fact charged with meaning and that the writer's job is not to somehow get behind it, but rather to show its great depth without also implying that the "surface" is inconsequential. O'Connor's advice to other writers here seems appropriate: "So I think that the more a writer wishes to make the supernatural apparent, the more real he has to be able to make the natural world, for if readers don't accept the natural world, they'll certainly not accept anything else" (*MM* 116). Furthermore, her repeated insistence that an artist's sole duty is to pay "the strictest attention to the real" (*MM* 96) clearly applies to O'Connor's notion of the *reader's* duty. Over and again, O'Connor decries the type of reading that seeks to distill a moral lesson or abstract a "theme" from art:

> People talk about the theme of a story as if the theme were like the string that a sack of chicken feed is tied with. They think that if you

> can pick out the theme, […] you can rip the story open and feed the chickens. […] A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. (*MM* 96)

To really read a story, then, is also to acknowledge that a story (so long as it can be called beautiful) cannot be told any other way and that one's own readerly statements about it will always be inadequate. As the discussion of the next thematic will show, Hart and O'Connor are entirely in agreement in this matter. Moreover, Hart's critique of Bultmann should serve as a warning to any reader, including this one, about how easy it is to simply "plumb" O'Connor's story, while doing violence to its surface.

6. Beauty Resists Reduction to the "Symbolic." "To speak of symbols too freely," says Hart, "is to speak like both a gnostic and a philistine, to alienate the aesthetic moment from its context of supplementarity, metaphorical deferral, cadence, and reference" (25). O'Connor describes this same tendency as a kind of hermeneutical calculus:

> [Some readers] seem to think that [a symbol] is a way of saying something that you aren't actually saying, and so if they can be got to read a reputedly symbolic work at all, they approach it as if it were a problem in algebra. Find *x*. And when they do find or think they find this abstraction, *x*, then they go off with an elaborate sense of satisfaction and the notion that they have "understood" the story. (*MM* 71)

For both Hart and O'Connor, however, it is clear that such an interpretive posture fails to perceive beauty or appreciate good art—fails to under-stand at all because it has, as it were, stood over the object and gleaned from it only that which suits its self-aggrandizing or self-soothing purposes. But "[t]he beautiful," Hart reminds us, "is prior to all schemes of isolable meaning: it is excess but never formlessness, a spilling over, jubilant, proclaiming glory without 'explaining' it" (25). "A story is good," O'Connor likewise reminds us, "when you continue to see more and more in it, and when it continues to escape you. In fiction two and two is always more than four" (*MM* 102).

Within this context, one cannot read Hart's last "thematic of beauty" without immediately thinking of O'Connor's own now legendary account of a conversation she had a dinner party. Upon hearing another guest describe the Eucharist as a pretty good symbol, O'Connor famously replied: "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it" (*CW* 977). Had the phrase not become such a patented O'Connorism, such a distinctive metonym for her work, one might expect that Hart would have used it here. For, as O'Connor and Hart both know, the impulse which reduces things to the "symbolic," is derivative of and akin to that violence which can make its own heaven a hell.

But the now well-worn connection implied between O'Connor's rejection of the Sacrament as merely a symbol and her insistence that good art likewise

rejected reducing the matter of her stories to the merely symbolic can perhaps gain a renewed vitality in light of Hart's discussion of beauty. It can, as I have been suggesting, offer a way to consider the reception of an art not reducible to the "symbolic" without implying the necessity of an originary violence. For it is precisely in this celebration of the Word made flesh, broken and shared that a Christian notion of beauty participates in and proclaims a language made new—a Word which draws all things unto itself, declaring "the pleasingness of their otherness," and re-membering them as creatures "already addressed and able now only to reply."

Thus, having surveyed Hart's thematics of beauty in light of Sykes' work on the *Aesthetic of Revelation*, we are now better able speak of beauty to distinguish between O'Connor and the Romantic or Modernist understanding of the symbol. "Epiphany" in this sense is not just a breaking in of beauty, but is rather the revelation of the grounds for and *telos* of all symbol-making. In some ways, "theophany" offers a better description of what O'Connor is hoping will happen as a reader encounters her art. Consequently, we can also better perceive the relevance of a theological aesthetics for Sykes' claim that O'Connor's stories thus become a kind of Eucharist. Indeed, Hart's insistence that beauty remains objective, serves as the true form of distance, evokes desire, crosses boundaries, guards against Gnosticism, and resists reduction to the 'symbolic,' seems an apt

description for both O'Connor's art and the church's sacrament. The Eucharist offered O'Connor not only an even deeper, richer model for what it might mean for her as an artist to "show, not tell," but it compelled her to keep her fiction grounded in the concrete, as the place where the "stuff of earthly life" could be transformed to communicate a mystery. Something like this is what other scholars have fruitfully described as O'Connor's "Incarnational Art" or her "Sacramental Imagination."[9] And whatever else we might say about it, it seems obvious that discussions of O'Connor's aesthetic cannot be undertaken in isolation from an understanding of the specific forms of her religious worship.

But we should also note in passing here that if what Sykes says is true, the model is not simply one of aesthetic *creation*, but rather necessarily implies, indeed, demands—much more than the James's dictum or Joyce's epiphany—a posture adequate for its *reception*. As Sykes has suggested, revelation in O'Connor often involves some degree of suffering, for both characters and readers. And yet, we must admit, this account of beauty so far has not adequately addressed beauty's relation to reading as an *imitatio crucis*, to the real possibility and means of suffering being revelatory and redemptive. For doesn't partaking in the broken body and shed blood of Christ at least require, if not

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[9] See Christina Lake's *The Incarnational Art of Flannery O'Connor* and Susan Srigley's *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art.*

celebrate, a kind of violence? Can sacra-ment ever be free of sacra-fice? As I show in the next chapter, Sykes rightly points to the Eucharist as a model for the unspoken revelation, embodied in the participation in and imitation of Christ which O'Connor intends for her readers. Yet even his accounting of the sacrament tends to characterize violence (despite his intentions) as an instrument that both God and author can use, apparently without posing contradiction to their otherwise creative, generative, and restorative purposes. In such readings of O'Connor, what is needed is a theological aesthetics capable of sustaining a hermeneutics of the sacraments, of sacrifice, and of suffering. What is needed is a notion of beauty that can offer up new images and transfigure the old ones, without itself enacting a hermeneutical violence. For O'Connor, as for Christian though throughout the ages, such an image can be found in the vision of an eschatological banquet, which is both longed for and always already. It is with such a banquet, as a sacrament practiced, enacted, and embodied by Christians in obedient imitation of Christ who is himself the form of beauty, to which we now turn.

CHAPTER THREE

The Eucharist, Cruciform Beauty and Christ the Form of Infinite Gifting: Towards a Theological Aesthetics of Sacrament, Sacrifice, and Suffering

> Both the person who is transported by natural beauty and the one snatched up by the beauty of Christ must appear to the world to be fools, and the world will attempt to explain their state in terms of psychological or even physiological laws (Acts 2.13). But they know what they have seen, and they care not one farthing what people may say. They suffer because of their love, and it is only the fact that they have been inflamed by the most sublime of beauties—a beauty crowned with thorns and crucified—that justifies their sharing in that suffering.
>
> —Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Seeing the Form*, 18)

To conclude the section of his book on O'Connor's aesthetic of revelation, John Sykes rightly turns to the grammar at the core of all her work:

> With only slight exaggeration we might say that when O'Connor wrote, she was hoping that her stories would become the words of institution that transform the stuff of earthly life into the body of God. Her model in this artistic endeavor was the Eucharistic celebration. And as in the Mass she daily attended, the climax for the worshipper is a silent beholding of a mystery with which we are in a communion beyond speech. The Word has become embodied; we taste it and we see it, but we do not speak it. (84)

As with so many of her characters, perhaps especially those whose death is imminent, Sykes contends that O'Connor's fiction finally "prepares the reader for the sacramental gesture that embodies divine grace" (84). Indeed, this seems to be precisely the "gesture" which Sykes ultimately thinks is capable of precipitating "an act of reading that that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*:"

“[H]aving presented us with the image sacramentally rendered, O’Connor seems to have hoped that her reader would in turn read sacramentally, absorbing directly an intuition of divine mystery that would operate as a source of grace” (85). Like the communicant who ingests Christ’s body and blood and thereby “embodies” again the Word made flesh, a reader in the line of Christ communes with the mystery always present before her, taking it all in without ever fully exhausting or “consuming” it, but being transformed by it, ever more aware that the “stuff of earthly life,” including herself, has been transfigured to proclaim itself more fully as a being proclaiming Being.

But this is no hermeneutic of Romantic ecstasy, for intrinsic to this model of a reader’s participation is the *brokenness* which Christ suffers and the violence which he endures. One might reasonably ask, then, whether it is even possible to conceive of a Christ-imitative reading that does not depend on violence or glorify suffering as an intrinsic good. Sykes’ earlier comments in this regard would seem to only confirm this impulse. Leading up to his account of the revelatory function of “sacramental suffering,” Sykes suggests that, “One of the way’s O’Connor’s work is sacramental is that in it, *violence becomes the occasion* for the sinner to join Christ, through his or her own body” (42 emphasis mine). For Sykes, the many instances of violence throughout O’Connor’s work can thus be thought of as “a kind of Eucharist in reverse.” Whereas the Eucharist conveys grace to its

recipients as the bread and wine are mysteriously transformed into the body and blood of Christ, the "violated body" of the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for example, "becomes the means whereby she is mysteriously united with Christ's grace as she repeats his suffering. Christ's suffering produces grace; our suffering opens us to that grace" (42).

Given this vision, one can begin to see the sequence of "sacramental" analogies between Christ, characters, and readers which would permit Sykes to value the "redemptive suffering" occasioned by O'Connor's "readerly violence" towards her readers. We should also be quick to acknowledge that the emphasis in this context is clearly on the significance of *the body* as "the occasion" for revelation, as the place whereby readers, characters and even author are transformed much in the same way the elements are transformed through the Eucharistic sacrament. And yet the vision Sykes casts, for believers and unbelievers alike, must sound profoundly unsettling. As he admits,

> The mystery of violence is the startling recognition that *by violence we are saved*—not by committing it, but by receiving it. Perhaps the most startling of O'Connor's fictional assertions is that *violence can be sacramental*—a means by which God's grace takes saving shape in the natural world. (42 emphasis mine)

For the sake of articulating an adequate understanding of O'Connor's aesthetic, we must insist here that the message of the cross and Easter does not actually mean anything unless it proclaims that we are ultimately saved *from*

violence, not *by* it. To say we must receive violence rather than commit it, is only a partial—often misunderstood and misused—truth of the gospel's greater message that death has been defeated once and for all (1 Cor. 15:54-58). Christ's body takes "saving shape," that is, reveals to us the greatest truth about ourselves as creatures who bear God's image, not just by being broken, but by transfiguring our notions of the body's perfection *in the midst* of brokenness—a perfection declaring a wholeness and communion with a God whose word is inseparable, incomprehensible apart from his action. And, notwithstanding the church's long history of offering mixed and often conflicting articulations of the Atonement, to think of the sacrament in such sacrificial terms, to suggest that violence can indeed be the "saving *shape*" of grace, certainly runs the risk of suggesting that God genuinely author(ize)s or perpetrates violence, even if only against his Son.

How, then, do we understand the relationship between suffering and grace? Between the cross and beauty? Between the reader's participation in a sacrament and revelation? From the perspective of theological aesthetics we have been pursuing, if a Christian notion of beauty "permits only of peace," wouldn't the very notion of a revelatory, redemptive suffering be in fact beauty's antithesis? Or, as David Hart asks,

> Can […] sacrifice defeat sacrifice? Is not the cross of Christ another myth of peace won through violence, of chaos and death subdued

> by a propiatory offering, and of, indeed (as Nietzsche said), the infinite multiplication of debt rather than its discharge?" (347)

And if we say that Christ is the exemplar we should imitate, an example we can only know with any intimacy in so far that we participate in the breaking of a body and the shedding of a blood, are we not again, in the very act of participation, simply proclaiming the necessity of violence? Clearly, the tenor of the rest of Sykes' work argues against such a conclusion, and yet, his elucidation here still suggests a need to speak of the Eucharist, Christ's suffering, and O'Connor's intention to prompt a Christ-imitative reading in ways that do not, perhaps unwittingly, make a good out of non-being. What the rest of the chapter seeks to make clear is that only within a Christian conception of beauty—that is, of Christ as the form of the Trinity's infinite gift-giving—can we not only offer an alternative to a grammar which sees violence as necessary and inevitable (as we did in the previous chapter), but speak coherently of how a reader's imitation of the cross might constitute a rejection of hermeneutical violence rather than yet another instantiation of it.

Building on Girardian Readings of Sacrifice, Sacrament, and Suffering

Over the last century in the West, possibly no one has tried harder or done more to grapple with the problem posed by the apparent acceptance and approval of violence in the Sacred Scriptures than René Girard. His body of

work demonstrates a sustained attempt at defining and refining the peculiar nature of Christ's sacrifice and what it means therefore for a Christian to follow in his example. Again and again, Girard's work points to this one fundamental insistence:

> Christ's death was not a sacrificial one. To say that Jesus dies, not as a sacrifice, but in order that there may be no more sacrifices is to recognize in him the Word of God. […] Rather than become the slave of violence, as our own word necessarily does, the Word of God says no to violence. (184)

In Girard's view, the message of love that Christ proclaims in return for the violence he receives disrupts the given cycle of violence, a cycle typically provoked by jealousy for what one's rival possesses ("mimetic desire") and the subsequent need for a victim ("scapegoat") who can bear the community's collective burden for wrongdoing. But because Christ alone uniquely bears no responsibility for violence, he transcends and ultimately unmasks even this "sacrificial mechanism" of violence as a *propagation of* rather than the *propitiation for* violence. Because he uniquely can proclaim—without the least hint of deceit or subterfuge—in his word and deed a message of love, Christ uncovers, indeed, rends the veil of the myths, systems, and grammars we have in place to justify

our own use of violence (ostensibly to keep violence at bay for the greater good). This, we might say, is the specific content of Christ's revelation.[1]

Not surprisingly, Girard's work offers at least a preliminary way to conceive of violence and the "sacramental gesture" in O'Connor's work that does not in the end simply glorify further violence. We might, for instance, revise Sykes' claim above to say that "*the occasion* for a sinner to join Christ, through his or her body," is in fact Christ's unwavering proclamation of a Gospel of love in the face of receiving a violence for which he alone is truly without blame, not the violence itself. Only in this highly qualified sense could we say "*by* violence we are saved" or suggest that "violence can be sacramental"—not really because of or *by* violence, but in spite of it and by rejecting it as a *means* to anything but further violence.

Certainly, Girard's scholarship has proven fruitful for O'Connor scholars who explicitly reject the conclusion that her art (or the Christian Scriptures) condones, depends on, or enacts an essential violence. For example, in his essay on "Violence and the Christian Mystery: A Way to Read Flannery O'Connor,"

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[1] In his later work, Girard seems to take his claims a step further to suggest that Christ, at least as he is presented in the Gospels, offers a new *mimesis*, a new way of imitation that proclaims a new kingdom, a new order not subject to the ultimately self-consuming, self-defeating cycles of violence.

Desmond employs Girard's framework to argue insightfully that "One function of violence in O'Connor's work is to unmask the myth of violence and make that 'absolute decision'—the choice between the kingdom of love and the kingdom of violence—absolutely clear" (139). This decision is both provoked and made possible, Desmond explains, in the prophetic work of Jesus Christ "who not only speaks out on behalf of the victim, but he also becomes the victim himself, when his message of the kingdom is rejected. […] Jesus the prophet becomes Jesus the victim. He is the one who suffers violence that puts an end to the myth of violence" (140–1). In this sense, Desmond suggests that O'Connor's work is also "prophetic" for the way that

> […] her stories break the silence that threatens to engulf and hide the meaning of the victim under the cloak of a self-justifying mythos of violence. […] Her message is an all-demanding one that shakes our foundations, especially since it repeatedly shows us the baleful consequences of our commitment to violence. (142)

Desmond is especially attuned to the human penchant for and undeniable history of justifying violence in such a way so as to make violence and death seem intrinsic, a necessary condition of the good. But even here, recourse to the language, if not grammar, of violence seems inescapable: "Paradoxically, [Christ's] message of love and nonviolence becomes for those who reject it the very source of violence, because it threatens the very foundations of their earthly existence" (140). And again, "The prophet is, paradoxically, the violently

nonviolent voice of love who speaks for the victim and often becomes the victim himself" (141).

As I have already begun suggesting, this notion of a "violently nonviolent love," paradoxical though it may be, is not unproblematic. Clearly Desmond is striving to articulate something very much like what Sykes means by a "counterviolence that receives violence and turns it against itself in the interest of peace" (41). It is also clear that both ultimately reject the suggestions implied by some of the critics quoted in the previous chapter that O'Connor would be justified in employing, even if in just a rhetorical sense, the kind of violence perpetrated by her characters. Desmond's language is consistent in many ways with the language O'Connor herself uses to describe how she approaches her readers, and it needs to be acknowledged that my own work is in no small way indebted to the careful, charitable exemplar of faithful readers such as Sykes and Desmond.

Nevertheless, after Kant, Nietzsche and the tendency in the last half a century towards assuming all rhetoric is, for better or worse, merely the exercise of one power over another, we must ask whether such a "paradox" is ethically, theologically, and aesthetically tenable. Do, in fact, the notions of violent-nonviolence, passive counterviolence or even O'Connor's "violence of love" ultimately transcend the very grammars which they seek to unmask? Is this not,

as Hart might say, just another "tale that defeats itself in the telling, the beauty of whose rhetoric proves in the end to be another—and particularly meretricious—variant of the glamour of violence?" (349). And what are the hermeneutical implications of such attempts to articulate a kind of violent nonviolence and conceive of the reality of human suffering as potentially redemptive or revelatory? What demands or culpability does this place on the artist? What of its audience? If indeed the artist, characters, and audience become most truly themselves in so far that they partake in Christ's suffering and imitate the way of the cross, is the work of art in some, possibly theologically-sanctioned sense ultimately required to inflict violence on its audience? Is O'Connor's own explanation of her art, then, merely a highly sophisticated and elusive excuse for the pain she inflicts? And wouldn't a failure to acknowledge it as such simply be yet another manifestation of an enduring, if not inevitable, cycle of violence? Yet another failure to read the world rightly? Moreover, can we even really say, given the variant readings we have already discussed, that O'Connor's art makes the absolute decision absolutely clear? Does such a claim leave any room for the "mystery" which O'Connor said over and again was the content of any real work of art?

Building on Desmond's work, Susan Srigley's own appropriation of René Girard seems especially aware of the ethical and theological implications

motivating these kinds of questions. Close attention to her work is therefore valuable for the way it both anticipates some of my criticisms and indirectly prompts the aesthetic I eventually turn to as a way forward. Unlike so many of her predecessors, in her essay on "The Violence of Love: Reflections on Self-Sacrifice through Flannery O'Connor and René Girard," Srigley argues vehemently that "the violence in O'Connor's fiction is not understood by her as divinely sanctioned, nor is it necessary as a revelatory force" (35). Rather, Srigley insists, "O'Connor's approach to the matter of violence tends to focus on how violence can reveal what might be lacking in human beings, especially in their relations of love, and, further, how love responds to violence" (33). Departing somewhat from Girard's strict rejection of any "sacrificial" reading of the Gospels, however, Srigley posits the possibility that *self*-sacrifice—"an internal disciplining and self-denial"—can indeed overcome "external forms of violence" (35).[2] Here, her description of the "violence of love" in O'Connor here clearly resonates with Desmond's notion of the non-violent paradox:

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[2] In his spendid analysis of *Desire, Violence, and Divinity in Southern Fiction*, Gary Ciuba makes this exact point in regards to O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*: "Love is violent only if violence is redefined as the struggle to master one's mimetic desire, especially for the sake of the other, rather than the struggle to overcome the other" (162). Also basing his reading on the work of René Girard, Ciuba's work anticipates some of the objections I raise below and is the most consistent and coherent in its refusal to depict either God or O'Connor as authors of violence. I have excluded it from the present discussion in part because I already draw out our point of difference from the other texts and because I shall employ it more directly in the final chapter. Where I believe my approach can contribute to the good work he does is in conceiving of desire

> O'Connor interprets both the inward and outward nature of violence, presenting her view that the Gospels reveal a pattern of love rooted in self-sacrifice and which is embodied by Christ's non-violence. What O'Connor calls this is, paradoxically, the "violence of love," which can be construed as violence against the self, or a "death" to the self, for the sake of others, and ultimately, for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The epigraph [to the *Violent Bear it Away*] suggests that in the face of violence, there is sometimes a "violence" required against the self, stemming from the effort to cover the impulse to more violence. (35)

Similar to Sykes' reading of Haze's self-blinding near the conclusion of *Wise Blood* (46), Srigley's model for this "violence against the self" is "the habit of ascetic discipline directed towards the internal struggle of the will" (35). As Srigley shows, O'Connor's comments clarifying her use of Matthew 11:12 for the title of *The Violent Bear it Away* clearly lend credence to this notion of the "*inward* 'violence' of love." In her correspondence, O'Connor famously lamented that "the fact that these are Christ's words" seldom made an impression on her readers: "That this is the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands, of an asceticism like John the Baptist's, but in the face of which even John is less than the least in the Kingdom—all this is overlooked" (*HOB* 382). In a later letter, O'Connor tellingly says, "This is surely what it means to bear away the kingdom

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as not simply a mimetic response to violence and therefore as something to be restrained, but rather as something given by and known in a Christian understanding of the Trinity and therefore to be cultivated once it is properly ordered. At this point, readers should note Ciuba's own brief, but helpful summary of O'Connor's statements and discussion of other critical works which have encouraged the misguided view that violence is salvific and therefore (at least, implicitly) necessary for O'Connor's art (156).

of heaven with violence: the violence is directed inward" (*CW* 1171). Like Sykes (and a rich tradition within Christian communities which has often been called upon to justify the apparent destructiveness of self-mortification), Srigley is quick to clarify that this inward violence is "not for selfish purposes, or simply self-negation" (37). Rather,

> the ascetic impulse is an attempt to absorb, or to take responsibility for, the violence inflicted on the Kingdom of Heaven. […] the violence is not directed inward as a negative force, nor is it commanded out of divine sadistic delight. The ascetic way is not pursued out of love of violence, or a hatred of the self; on the contrary, it is a hatred and rejection of violence and the suffering it inflicts, as well as a love of the true self and what is good in it. (39)

Given this description of ascetic self-sacrifice, the ultimate model is clearly Christ and we can, I think, begin to understand better what Sykes is aiming at in his notion of a readerly violence intending to precipitate a reading that is an *imitatio crucis*. Reading, in this sense, would require a kind of violence against one's impulse to do violence to a text. It requires sacrificing one's immediate desires or perhaps even presuppositions for the sake of truly encountering the text as it is, not as one might want it to be. And doing this is not simply a matter of deciding we want to do it, merely a momentary assertion of the human will, but rather also requires a habitual practice, a constant disciplining of the will to seek the good of the other, of "giving" as O'Connor says, "more than the law demands." Such an account of readerly self-sacrifice, of "violent" love clearly

invokes the Church's hermeneutical tradition and harkens to such foundational texts for Christian reading practices as Augustine's rules for charitable (loving) interpretation in *De Doctrina Cristiana*. Not surprisingly, it also parallels quite closely the kinds of skills or posture towards a subject which O'Connor repeatedly said were necessary for *creating* a work of art.

Nevertheless, Srigley's account also raises challenges that demand our attention for several reasons, not the least of which is that they point to the underlying limitations of Girard's project and the way forward. The fact that Srigley's approach so nearly parallels O'Connor's own language makes her argument especially compelling, and certainly the model for a Christ-imitative reading I present in later chapters will resonate with much of Srigley's description of self-sacrifice (especially that dimension which loves "the true self and what is good in it"). And in light of John Milbank's and David Hart's critique of Girard's framework, we will have occasion in the next section to more fully evaluate whether Srigley's departure from and somewhat surprising attempt in the end of her essay to accommodate her non-sacrificial theory of self-sacrifice to Girard's work is ethically and aesthetically sustainable. For now, it is enough to simply ask again whether labeling the "violence of love" a paradox, in the end, constitutes a sufficient rejection of violence. Despite the warrant she finds for such language in O'Connor's writings (and, to a degree, the Scriptures),

and despite the care Srigley expends in rejecting a notion of violence as "necessary," the mere fact that we cannot seem to find a way to describe this movement without again referring to violence seems to nevertheless proclaim its necessity. And suggesting that violence is something to be "absorbed" or that Christ and those who follow him might take responsibility for it, perhaps suggests that Srigley doesn't altogether conceive of evil as a "privation of good," as "a purely parasitic corruption of created reality, possessing no essence or nature of its own" (Hart, *Doors* 73). Calling it a "paradox" in this intellectual context is, in light of Hart's theology of beauty, not only to avoid the real challenge Nietzsche poses, but to ignore the alternative vision already posed by the Christian tradition.

As a kind of blanket ethical principle, "self-sacrifice" can become all too easily divorced from the real vision of the good from which it stems. As John Milbank points out in "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," when disinterested self-sacrifice is rendered in abstract terms as the pinnacle of ethical action (consider the ease with which we toss around the term "altruism"), it tends to reconfigure (usually in service of State interest) non-being as the highest good. But, as Milbank also observes, "the image of dying for the other—though it is the advent of the good in fallen time—cannot itself be the final good, without once more subordinating the person to an impersonal totality, in this case an abstract moral

principle."[3] Insofar that it is subordinate to the "impersonal totality" at least, the ethics of self-sacrifice all too-easily becomes yet another rhetoric of violence, another story whose beauty is particularly malicious.

Undoubtedly, Srigley's account of self-sacrifice is positing much more than just an abstract moral principle, rooted as it is in Christ's example and O'Connor's reading of Scripture. And yet, beyond serving as a general warning against coercive versions of "self-sacrifice," the essence of Milbank's critique still applies in so far as "self-discipline" as an ethic—even when it is a way of bearing responsibility for another's violence—is offered as being comprehensible and justified by its own internal logic. Despite rightly acknowledging asceticism as a "love of the true self and what is good in it," what is ultimately missing from Srigley's account of self-sacrifice, Milbank would say, is a "vision of the eschatological banquet:" something like what the Middle Ages understood as

> a reciprocal state of being that persons had to enter into with familiar others, with adopted kin under God, and with friends with whom they were conjoined in a common purpose. Charity was not something for me, privately, to perform, but an entire network of complex reciprocity.

Apart from such an "economy" of immeasurable communal reciprocity, Milbank makes it clear, self-sacrifice as an ethical imperative is incapable of proclaiming

[3] Milbank, John. "The Ethics of Self Sacrifice." *First Things.* March 2009. FirstThings.com. Web. 25 June, 2012.

any higher good than the effacement of the self for the sake of an unknown other. Speaking of self-sacrifice in this way, we might say, is like proclaiming the necessity of fasting without ever making reference to the feast which prompts and sustains it in the first place.

Similarly, we might also question whether the strict dichotomy Srigley poses between *external* and *internal* violences ultimately encourages—again, contrary to her own intentions—a proto-Manichean division of reality or a gnostic elevation of the spiritual over the material. This tendency shows up in relatively minor turns of phrase, especially in her treatment of "desire," but the aesthetic and theological implications, as we shall see, are quite significant. For the most part, Srigley always clarifies that the desire O'Connor rejects is the specifically violent kind of "*mimetic* desire" Girard describes. And yet, her embrace of a self-sacrificing asceticism at times belies the need for a more nuanced affirmation of the creative dimension of desire:

> The "violence of love" is the language that O'Connor employs to describe the spiritual discipline of the heart, grounded in the recognition that to cultivate a love which serves the other requires active training (*ascesis*) and the restraint of one's own desires. In this sense, love can entail a felt "violence" insofar as it must actively overcome the desires and impulses of the self for the sake of other. (36)

It is striking that for Srigley, especially in this case, love seems to be more often than not a *restraint* of desire rather than the cultivation of it, something to be

“overcome” rather than directed towards its proper end. And while we can assume Srigley would surely be willing to admit this more positive role for desire, her related tendency towards articulating an “ethic of responsibility” (as opposed perhaps to an ethic of delight in the genuinely delightful) tends to color her description of self-sacrifice as primarily a giving *up* of the self, rather than simply a giving of the self.[4] In the latter, the self is not merely abdicated for the sake of another, but is rather offered as a genuine gift in the fullest sense of the word—as something unique, irreplaceable, intrinsically valuable, the occasion of great pleasure, and, as Milbank would say, in the context of a dynamic reciprocal relationship which alone can articulate a vision of the good. It also happily avoids the suggestion that the *giving* of the self necessarily involves a *losing* of the self. In describing the economy of marriage, for example, such language proclaims the hopeful promise that in the giving of one’s entire self, the true self is not only retained in all its fullness, but is actually amplified, made more fully itself in being known and possessed by an other.

It is therefore tempting to suggest that what Srigley and O’Connor are really referring to is merely a self-*giving* rather than a self-*sacrifice*, a distinction that, as Girard perhaps also saw by insisting on the “non-sacrificial” nature of

[4] See especially Srigley’s *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art* where “the ethics of responsibility” becomes the guiding concept throughout.

Christ's death, would avoid invoking the almost inevitable connotation of an essential, ritualistic violence. And yet, to do so, as Milbank and Hart rightly observe in their separate critiques of Girard, would be to unwittingly divorce even a healthy concept of self-giving from the very narrative which alone can sustain it and grant it any real measure of ethical coherence. There is finally no escaping the language of "sacrifice" in the Bible, nor can it be avoided—without enacting a kind of hermeneutical violence—in the practice of the church or in the celebration of the sacraments. Doing so would inevitably involve reducing the sacraments to mere symbols or the scriptural texts to simple allegories, exalting the observer as a mythologist of the observed.

What is needed, therefore, before one can coherently articulate a vision of the sacraments and a notion of revelatory or redemptive suffering, one that neither assumes the necessity of violence nor imposes its own violence, is the ability to perceive a greater richness and multivalency within Christian story itself. In this regard, Srigley's work is to be especially commended for its insistence on situating O'Connor's aesthetic within her understanding of the Christian Scriptures and thus, if somewhat indirectly, anticipates a major weakness in Girard's account. Nevertheless, as we have already begun to see, both Srigley's and Desmond's use of Girard to engage questions of violence in

O'Connor's work also flesh out some significant, underlying limitations to Girard's anthropologically-centered theology.

Beyond Girardian Readings

In their critiques of René Girard, both John Milbank and David Hart acutely diagnose the limitations of critical attempts that either embrace violence in O'Connor as itself the vehicle of redemption or posit instead a "paradox" meant to undermine such outright misprisions of violence as being aesthetically generative, creatively sustainable, and ethically justified. Though, from the perspective of theology and O'Connor criticism, the latter approach must I think be regarded as infinitely preferable, what Milbank and Hart in the end demonstrate is that any interpretive attempt which begins by conceding to the assumptions of a supposedly "secular," disinterested, rational positivism[5] must ultimately fail to adequately suggest an alternative that does not itself enact another violence.

[5] Hart's brief, parenthetical description of the "great project of 'modernity'" here is well put: "the search for comprehensive metanarratives and epistemological foundations by way of a neutral and unaided rationality, available to all reflective intellects, and independent of cultural and linguistic conditions." Significantly, though Hart rejects "postmodernity's" insistence on an inevitable violence, he finds its assumptions much more amenable to the non-dialectical, "aesthetic character" of truth: " 'reason' cannot inhabit language (and it certainly has no other home) without falling subject to an indefinite deferral of meaning, a dissemination of signification, a play of nonsense and absence, such that it subsists always in its own aporias, suppressions of sense, contradictions, and slippages; and 'reason' cannot embody itself in history without at once becoming irrecoverably lost in the labyrinth of time's interminable contingencies (certainly philosophy has no means of defeating such doubts)" (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 3).

Thus, Milbank's critique centers on Girard's "theory of religion" which grants him, *ipso facto*, a privileged vantage point ("clearly rooted in modern, liberal culture" (397)) from which he can judge certain cultural practices as "bad." Though Milbank obviously agrees with Girard's overarching claim that Jesus's example indeed rejects the economy of sacrificial violence, his point is that by approaching the question of violence as primarily an anthropologist, Girard undermines his own possibility to posit a real alternative to the logic of *mimetic* desire that is not simply a reaffirmation of his own cultural assumptions.[6] As primarily a scientist, Girard must impose a value from without the text rather than read or inhabit it from within not just the text but the community of readers who alone can interpret it (insofar that its commands can be comprehended only in the obedient practice of discipleship to Christ). One way this can be seen, Milbank suggests, is in Girard's "attitude to desire: desire, he assumes, is never for the *objectively* desirable, but only for what others deem to be desirable" (397). Because Girard's critique itself can only begin with what his own culture deems

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[6] More recently, Girard's work seems to have taken into account some of these critiques I raise below (see, for example, the later interviews that appear in *The Girard Reader* where Girard wishes he could rearrange the sequence of his discoveries, to start where he ends and end where he begins). Nonetheless, I consider my use of Milbank and Hart justified since they are still explicitly addressing the same texts (*Violence and the Sacred* and especially, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*) which the critics I mention use to support their readings of O'Connor. At times, I admit, Milbank's critique in particular, seems to insufficiently value, even mischaracterize Girard's contributions for the sake of his larger project. However, I still think his critique is valuable in so far that it highlights the direction we are headed with in Hart—rehabilitating "desire" as a property of beauty and pointing to Christ as the "form" of beauty.

desirable, it is “difficult to see what [Girard’s notion of] ‘the Kingdom’ could really amount to, other than the negative gesture of refusal of desire, along with all cultural difference” (398). In the end, Christ can only be a “unique *individual*” who offers only a “negative refusal,” but “no positive, alternative practice.” (This lack of a communal, lived-out positive alternative perhaps also helps explain why Desmond must ultimately fall back on the paradox of “violent non-violence” or why Srigley must allow the very grammar she is rejecting to again dictate her notion of a “loving violence” against the self.)

Furthermore, Girard’s inability to account for, theologically speaking, “the concrete ‘form’ taken by Jesus’s non-violent practice” then actually undermines his claim for Christ’s “uniqueness,” as someone or something other than a human construct or ideal. In light of Girard’s suggestion that Israel already had an inkling of the non-sacrificial message Christ offers, Milbank asks:

> Given that the Hebrews had already arrived at a ‘partial’ rejection of sacrifice, why should they not have arrived at a total one, out of entirely human resources, if all that Jesus really seems to offer is a denial of culture, and not the imagination of something beyond culture, which would indeed be humanly problematic? (398)

Moreover, for Milbank, this raises questions about how anyone can even begin to understand what Christ’s refusal means to begin with: “if Jesus suffered perfectly, or if he alone really refused a dominating violence, then how do we *know* this, how does ‘it come through to us’?” (399). How does it come through

the violence we all inhabit if it is so far beyond it, unless we had somehow already discovered this perfection for ourselves, even if we refused to enact it? Would not Christ, again, just be an affirmation of the perfection we secretly attribute to our own enlightened, insightful selves? Without being able to draw on a rich notion of ecclesiological revelation, Milbank suggests that Girard is ultimately limited by the empirical assumptions of his approach. Given his presuppositions, what he can know, all he can observe, is subject first (and last) to what his culture has conditioned him to value. And while it may in fact be the case that the cultural conditions happen to enable a great deal of overlap, as it clearly does for Girard, Milbank's entire project takes great pains to show how ultimately such conclusions can only offer an abstraction, a kind of theory that never really conveys an incarnate theology.

Thus, in relation to Sykes' notion of a Christ-imitative reading, we might likewise ask, how could or do we know that the "revelatory suffering" we experience is actually imitating Christ and not just a more general suffering? To what degree, if at all, and through what means, does it 'come through to us'? What makes our suffering, or even Christ's, redemptive and not simply the consequence of, say, a general culture of masochistic narcissism? Without access to any greater theological truths beyond asserting God's fundamentally non-violent character or, just as significantly, without having any concrete, lived

practice of the alternative, Christ's example seems to offer little beyond a simple reaffirmation of our own cultural predilections. In this sense, in the absence of theology's authority (borne both out of its reading of the Scriptures and the Church's faithful witness and communal practice as the Body of Christ), even the kind of self-sacrifice Srigley proposes, can easily be co-opted to serve the interests of the ruling powers, state and culture alike.

But Milbank acknowledges that "One can rescue Girard's argument for Jesus's finality and divinity if one links it with the idea that the exemplary narratives of Jesus show us the 'shape,' and the concrete possibility, of a non-violent practice" (399). Doing this would require a concept of Jesus's divinity relating to "the possibility of a non-violence in *a particular pattern of existence*, not to the intrusion of extra-human enabling capacities" (400 emphasis mine). And this "particular pattern," for Milbank as for O'Connor, can only be known from the way the Scriptures tell its story from within the life, practice, and communion of the Church. For the Church is Christ's body and therefore the ongoing proclamation of the incarnate Word, the same Word invoked explicitly at the beginning of Genesis and the Gospel of John but proclaimed throughout the entire scriptures as the *alpha* and *omega* of all words. "We need," Milbank thus concludes, "the stories of Jesus for salvation, rather than just a speculative notion of the Good, because only the attraction exercised by a particular set of words

and images causes us to acknowledge the Good and to have an idea of the ultimate *telos*" (401). Moreover, because "an abstract attachment to non-violence" will always be insufficient, we need to "practice" these stories, to learn their "idiom," (402) before we can be fully persuaded of their truth. For "only persuasion of the *truth* can be non-violent, but truth is only available through persuasion" (401 emphasis mine).

In offering such a critique, Milbank both anticipates and provokes the alternative we find in the work of David Hart. Like Milbank, Hart also argues that Girard's penchant for abstract characterizations leaves him finally unable to adequately distinguish between two modes of sacrifice, and thus able only to reject the language of "sacrifice" altogether. Hart agrees with Girard that

> If the language of sacrifice in Christian thought did properly refer to an economy of exchange, such that God were *appeased* in the slaughter of a victim and his wrath were simply *averted* by way of a prudential violence of which he *approved* (and who can deny that many Christians have imagined their faith in just these terms?) then indeed the Christian God would be a God of violence, and the Christian evangel of peace would simply dissemble another economy of violence and debt—one that, in fact (Nietzsche winning the field), has been monstrously magnified. (349)

Nevertheless, the Bible is replete with the language of sacrifice and simply arguing for a "non-sacrificial reading of the Gospel text" as Girard does, risks isolating the Gospel's message from the one source which proclaims it or can make any sense of it. Thus, much like Milbank, Hart argues that Girard's blanket

refusal of the language of "sacrifice," in the end, makes "Christ look suspiciously like a figure who saves simply by pointing beyond every economy—and every world; […] a revolutionary outcry that forever interrupts the story of the world but tells no story of its own" (349).

What, then, is the story that Christ tells, what is the particular "form" of its persuasion, the "particular pattern" of its existence, and what does any of this have to do with violence in O'Connor? In light of both Girard's work and these critiques, we can safely conclude that if "readerly suffering" is indeed revelatory or redemptive in O'Connor, it is not so as a result of an "economy of exchange" whereby God (or an author) is somehow appeased by, even delights in the violence he approves. Saying so, we might add, is not so much a rejection of John Hawkes' argument (or that line of reasoning with which he has now almost become synonymous), as it is an indictment of Hawkes' failure and that of his successors to acknowledge the violence which they are so carelessly promoting. And even though one might reasonably protest that Hawkes is being far more consistent—even more coherently Christian—in equating O'Connor with her devils than those who somehow claim that this violence is God's instrument, we must then also acknowledge, that it would be a consistency of the very same sort which allows Ivan Karamazov to say "everything is permissible."

If Hart is right in his assessment of Girard, however, it seems that this conclusion should also make us reluctant to offer our own "non-sacrificial" readings of O'Connor's stories, for the same reason that this would isolate her stories from the very narrative which gives them their meaning and coherence. As I seek to show in the next chapter, any coherent understanding of O'Connor's aesthetic, of the violence that is "made to live" in her work, and of the revelatory possibility she conceives within it, must account for her work as not simply evocative of, but indeed as dependent on the whole story the Bible tells—on the language of the Old Testament, as much as, if not more so than the Gospels. Thus, before we can really say what it might mean for a reader to read in *imitatio crucis,* to know, as it were, the story's "idiom," we must, as Hart does, distinguish between two kinds of sacrifice. We must also, as Milbank does, be able to conceive of readerly "self-sacrifice" as not primarily an expression of individual "altruism" or even stoic self-discipline (as Srigley's account might lend itself to), but rather as a measure and natural consequence of one's belonging to a community of "reciprocal exchange," a community whose end is a vision of the eschatological banquet and whose means is not rhetorical violence, but the feast of the Eucharist. Doing so, moreover, is a prerequisite for understanding the concrete shape of beauty's non-violent rhetoric, of that truth which alone can proclaim a "persuasion of peace" and shape desire. For Christ,

Hart reminds us, both reveals and "belongs to the Trinity's eternal 'discourse' of love, which eternally 'invites' and offers regard and recognition." Indeed, only because such beauty "precedes and exceeds, […] every economy of power, because all 'credit' is already given and exhausted, because the love it declares and invokes is prior to, and the premise of, all that is given" (Hart 350) can we even conceive of the possibility of a readerly imitation of Christ that is neither prompted *by* nor *to* violence.

Sharing Stories and a Rhetoric of Gift-Giving: Christ the Form of Trinitarian Beauty

One might say that for Hart, Girard's central error is essentially a failure as a reader to comprehend the Bible's poetry, "the richness, multivalency, and ambiguity inherent in the language of sacrifice in Jewish and Christian thought" (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 350). That is, one cannot fully appreciate Christ's story without also understanding the story of Israel, and a failure to read the story of Easter in light of the Passover story is to ignore

> the conversion [that] theology effects of the story of wrath into the story of mercy, or how it replaces the myth of sacrifice as economy with the narrative of sacrifice as a ceaseless outpouring of gift and restoration in an infinite motion exceeding every economy. (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 350)

Thus, what Girard needs is not so much a theory of "non-sacrificial sacrifice" but the ability to hear within "sacrifice" itself its truest expression and greatest fulfillment, to see the very "motion" which the narratives of wrath and violence

seek to defeat. For Hart, the language of sacrifice in Christian theology "underwrites not the stabilizing regime of prudential violence, but the destabilizing extravagance of giving and giving again, of declaring love and delight in the exchange of signs of peace, outside of every calculation of debt or power" (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 350). A genuinely Christian notion of "sacrifice," like a Christian notion of beauty, therefore, is always inseparable, incomprehensible apart from the language of gift. But it is also crucial, as perhaps Srigley begins to see, that this language of gift-giving does not merely supplant the language of sacrifice altogether; considering sacrifice's "destabilizing extravagance" is rather a way of recognizing its true end, of describing its own motion towards an exchange which exceeds every economy as a Word which does not simply oppose, but quite literally trans-figures. In this way, the Old Testament language of sacrifice "does not serve a stable system of debt, but rather forces Israel to recognize itself as a gift to be restored, an address to be answered" (351).

An example of such a response to an address and restoration of the gift is made manifest in the story of Isaac. For in taking Isaac, who is already God's gift to—and of—Israel, "the whole promise and substance of God's covenant,"

Abraham offers him again as a "gift, returned before the gift has been truly given."[7] And yet God,

> who is not a God of the indeterminate sublime, feeding upon the destruction of the beautiful, but a God of determinate beauty and love, gives the gift again, will not allow the gift to be rendered up into the absolute, will not permit the infinite motion of the gift to be transformed into the closed circle of sacrificial economics. (352)

It is only in dialogue with this story (itself a gift exchange), therefore, that Hart can declare that the cross of Christ "should be seen not simply as *a* sacrifice," or as Girard would have it, as a non-sacrifice, "but as the convergence of two radically opposed orders of sacrifice" (353). The crucifixion is both "gift and immolation: Christ giving himself to God in the entirety of his life lived toward the Father, unto death, and the violence of worldly power folding back upon this motion in an attempt to contain it " (354). But the cross, as a symbol of a closed economy of sacrifice, utterly fails "to put an end to the motion of Christ's life, to the infinity of his gift. Thus one order of sacrifice is raised up, the other cast down, reduced to a kind of futility." By very definition, then, the economy of sacrificial violence must fail and its finitude proclaimed, for the "sacrificial out-pouring of the infinite cannot be brought to an end by crucifixion, because it continues to be the gift it is even in surrendering itself to the violences

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[7] As we shall see in the next chapter, O'Connor means something very much like this when she refers to the "reasonableness" of Abraham which animates her entire work (*HOB* 116).

of the world. Its motion is repeated, unabated, even in being suppressed." Indeed, such an infinite self-giving overcomes and transfigures all that which seeks to contain it. The cross itself, "Rome's persuasive image of terror," is rendered futile and becomes instead "a far more persuasive image of love." Even Judas's traitorous handing over of Jesus, is "contained and surpassed by Christ's handing over of himself to the Father" (354). "This," Hart says, "is the infinite excess of God's gift: that it will not cease to be gift [...]" (352).

But, as we have begun to see, such an account of sacrifice as an economy of gifts rather than of settling violence's debts with further violence, whether of the Gospels or the books of the Law, cannot be understood apart from a Christian understanding of the Trinity. "For Christian thought," Hart reminds us,

> the true order of sacrifice is that which corresponds to the motion of the divine *perichoresis*, the Father's giving of the Son, the Son's execution of all the Father is and wills, the Spirit's eternal offering back up of the gift in endless variety, each person receiving from and giving to each other in infinite love. (353)

Indeed, only in light of such a conception of the Trinity can the doctrines of Incarnation, Atonement, and Creation that Sykes invokes make any real sense or avoid positing violence as necessary. There can be no proper conception of the "role of the body in salvation," "the value of human suffering," or "evil as privation of good," without a rich sensitivity to the way in which the whole Bible

proclaims the ceaseless exchange of gifts between the three persons of the Trinity—which is another way of saying that without this "motion of divine *perichoresis*," there can be no real understanding of beauty either. "The most elementary statement of theological aesthetics," Hart explains, "is that God is beautiful." And this means "not only that God is beauty or the essence and archetype of beauty," but that "God is beauty *and* also beautiful, whose radiance shines upon and is reflected in his creatures" (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 177).[8] To say God is beauty *and* also beautiful, is to speak of love's *perichoresis*: "a dynamic coinherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared regard, delight, fellowship, feasting, and joy" (155). And such a beauty, we have already seen, permits of no violence for it is a "destabilizing extravagance of giving and giving again," the "infinite excess" of God's gift which will not cease to be a gift.

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[8] Significantly, Hart's description of beauty is strikingly similar to Romano Guardini's description of love in his chapter on "God's Dominion and Man's Freedom" in a book O'Connor read and owned called *The Faith and Modern Man*: "Our use of the words "I" and "you" is but a reflection of God's being. Holy Scriptures tells us that God is love. Not merely that He is loving, which might imply that He loves as we love, only more and better; not even that He is embodiment of love, the fountainhead of that which is evident whenever one being turns lovingly to another. It means more than all that. It means that Love is God Himself, that what a man does when he loves is but a reflection of what God is. And whenever a man speaks simply of "Love," he means God, whether he realizes the fact or not." (32). That O'Connor read this and greatly admired all of Guardini's writings, strongly suggests her affinity with the vision of the beautiful Hart describes.

But such an account of beauty's sacrifice, even within an understanding of the Trinity's infinite fellowship, also requires an understanding of Christ as the form, the particular pattern of beauty's gratuitous, boundary-crossing, gift giving. For, as Hart so powerfully shows, to think of Christ as the *form,* the shape of beauty is to think of Christ as "God's supreme rhetoric:"

> Christ is called God, is indeed God the Son, and so is not a symbol of God, a mere signifier indicating God, or simply a messenger of God; his continuity with the Father is one of much more radical aesthetic immediacy: he, uniquely is the very form of God; in him sign and significance are one. (320)

Or, as Hans von Balthasar puts it, "Jesus is the Word, the Image, the Expression and the Exegesis of God" (29). As the "Exegesis of God," then, though we have spoken first of the Trinity's beautiful endless exchange of beauty—as the only persuasion which can also be peace insofar that it restores oneself as a gift already received—it is perhaps more fitting to begin with Christ the form of Beauty for, as von Balthasar says, Christ "is the form because he is the content" (451). Christ is not only the expression of the beautiful but its measure; as "the centre of the form of revelation" not only do all individual expressions of beauty make reference to Christ's beauty, but Christ's beauty makes all things, including the cross, beautiful. For he "is the Logos who comprises—even in his historical particularity—the fullness of every expression to which his form gives rise, the truth of every beauty consequent upon his beauty" (Hart 321).

To say Christ is the form beauty, therefore, is to say he both inhabits and gives "distance." As both the form of "distance" and the expression of beauty's boundary-crossing motion, Christ offers us a model for imagining and depicting an infinity which is not formlessness, for using language's limits to convey limitlessness without also implying pointlessness, for conceiving of analogies that open up to further analogies without also rendering themselves inconsequential. As Hart says, "there is no contradiction or tension between the course of the Son into the world—into flesh and time, past the very limits of creaturely being in to the darkness of death and hell, past even death into the glorious life of the resurrection" because to speak of being itself, the form of the "Trinitarian mystery," is simply to speak of "a movement of self-outpouring, manifestation, and act of abasement and exaltation in the single gesture of the gift" (324).

And by no means does this view of beauty imply something like the consuming totality of Kant's sublime nor is it a kind of romantic prettiness that is meant only to comfort and edify, encouraging through its willful ignorance an escape from the concrete, the ugly, and the disturbing. For, to truly say Christ is the form of a Trinitarian beauty, is to acknowledge that "the manifestation of the one eternal act by which God is God," is always a going forth, a spanning of distance and a crossing of boundaries, even to the depths of godlessness (322).

And to say Christ is the form of beauty is to also say that in the very revelation of that form, the *human* form finds its restoration:

> He who is from the beginning the head of all things recapitulates the human entirely, in the shape and substance of a whole life lived for the Father, never lapsing into sin, never yielding to the temptation to turn from God, enacting in every instant the divine figure of the human. (326)

Moreover, in the very language of Christ's beauty, human language itself is restored: "Christ is the perfect proportion, the complete Word of the God who is always his own analogy; he is the infinite Word whose analogical scope releases—and so contains—an infinite sequence of words" (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 321). Precisely because the Christian tradition is always, at best, "a joyous but inadequate attempt to span the infinity of the sign that [Christ] is," as the Logos of the Father, Christ comprehends, exceeds, and invites further signs:

> The figure of Christ accrues more figures, it yields ever more "excessive" statements in regard to itself […]. This is the analogical and poetical eruption that follows from the aesthetic power of Christ's presence, the inevitable exposition of the style of lordship […] that he embodies, never having said enough until it has said "God"—which is the very impossibility of ever having said enough. And still Jesus of Nazareth, the Father's Logos, beckons language on. (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 328)

Thus, to say Christ is the form of beauty is to see in this "poetical eruption," not only a justification and measure for the telling (and living) of more stories—the making of more figures which in their own way always strive for but never say enough—but also a way to conceive of the restored human form as being

essentially a poem-maker. To say so is not to put forth a kind of Arnoldian humanism, but rather to evoke something like what Sykes has already suggested in his vision of O'Connor as an artist who joins "God in saving humanity […] through a special kind of making with its own restorative goodness" (8).

It also, a way of suggesting what it means to be a poem-reader. For if Christ is both the "sign and the signified," the "complete Word of the God who is always his own analogy," the "image" and the "exegesis," than every true interpretation of the beautiful implies being first interpreted by it, and every genuine apprehension implies first being apprehended. A reader who seeks to imitate Christ will both be able to read beauty, but also be read by it—to recognize in the story and motion of Christ, the story and motion of his truest self: the eternal receiving and giving back of the Father's gifts, beyond even the violence which attempts to suppress it. And this finally, we can, we must say is the saving shape of reading sacramentally, of reading in the *imitatio Christi*: it is always a going forth, without forsaking—but for the sake of—one's true home; it is a sacrifice which transfigures every closed economy into an endless banquet of gift-giving; it is a bestowing of one's desire as the only proper response to having been first deemed desirable, not out of any need or lack, but out of the gratuity of God's "unmasterable excess;" its genuine delight in and discovery of a figure suggests not the solution to a puzzle, but the invitation to more figures endlessly

accruing; it is finally, a hearing and speaking whose rhetoric is not inscribed in violence, but whose persuasion is peace.

And just as to speak of Christ as the form beauty is to refer to not simply an abstract notion or ideal—an ethic which can be enlisted or co-opted into the service of another end, but the very particularity which upholds, confirms, and invites one's own historical particularity—to rightly read and be read by beauty's rhetoric is not simply a matter of speaking and hearing. It is, rather, a practice and habit whose persuasion lies in being lived out. Thus, a reader in the line of Christ must acknowledge two further gifts: the gift of the sacraments and the gift of martyrs. For if, as Milbank says, we need stories, a "particular set of words and images," to move beyond "just a speculative notion of the Good" (401), we need stories that not only move beyond just a speculative notion of suffering and sacrifice, but ones that can show, rather than tell us the shape, practice and "idiom" of what it means to read the world as Christ does. To even begin to do this well, as we have seen, we must be able to see in the sacraments not another rhetoric of violence, but one of peace—one in which words aren't simply supplanted but transfigured as they are seen through and then refer back to the good news of the Gospel. But the story of the sacraments is also the story of the church, Christ's body. So we need the stories of its saints and its martyrs to not only know the story of Christ, but to recognize Christ's story in every story

which lays claim to beauty. Again the pattern here, the logic of it, points to a reciprocal exchange: the stories of martyrs offer a way to understand the beauty of the Gospel and therefore also any story which is beautiful; but beautiful stories also enable us to make sense of the martyr's stories, for in them we can begin to see, not the stabilizing order of one power over another, but the destabilizing motion of a gift which continues always to be gift.

William Cavanaugh's fascinating exploration of "the actual and potential impact of the Eucharist on the dictatorship" (205) of Chile's Augusto Pinochet drives the real, lived significance of this point home. In his work on *Torture and the Eucharist* Cavanaugh makes the audacious claim that "The Eucharist *is* the church's response to torture, and the hope for Christian resistance to the violent disciplines of the world" (2 emphasis mine). Using Chile's tragic history as a way to concretely locate his observations, Cavanaugh reasons that if the goal of state sanctioned torture is to "discipline an entire society into an aggregate of fearful and mutually distrustful individuals," (15) by definition, the Eucharist explicitly resists such "atomizing" violence by gathering "the church into the true body of Christ, [...] into an economy of pain and the body which stands directly counter to that of torture" (17). Naturally, for Cavanaugh, as with O'Connor and Hart, the whole argument depends on assuming that the Eucharist is clearly much more than just a sign or a symbol: "Christ's Eucharistic body is both *res et*

sacramentum, sign and reality. Christ does not lie behind the Eucharistic sign, but saturates it. Christians do not simply read the sign but perform it" (14). In fact, Cavanaugh's larger project can be justly characterized as an attempt to detail the violent consequences of forgetting or rejecting this truth. So, as with Hart, we can see here also that it is precisely this refusal to reduce things or people (or itself be reduced) to the merely "symbolic" which also makes the Eucharist a persuasion in the interest of peace:

> Eucharistic sacrifice is the end of violent sacrifice on which the religions of the world are based, for its aim is not to create new victims but rather martyrs, witnesses to the end of victimization. Assimilation to Christ's sacrifice is not the continuation of the violence and rivalry needed to sustain a certain conception of society, but the gathering of a new social body in which the only sacrifice is the mutual self-offering of Christian charity. Martyrs offer their lives in the knowledge that their refusal to return violence for violence is an identification with Christ's risen body and an anticipation of the heavenly banquet.

In words that hearken to Hart's own project, Cavanaugh summarizes, "If torture is the imagination of the state, the Eucharist is the imagination of the church" (229).

And it is precisely this imagination which I have argued offers a vision of how one's apprehension of beauty may entail suffering without also proclaiming the inevitability or necessity of violence. This is the imagination which can see beauty's persuasion as a gift, rather than coercion. But is an imagination which never is limited to our minds, nor can it be invented there. For as Cavanaugh,

and Milbank, and Hart all remind us, it is an imagination which is cultivated in the experience of and desire for one another as God's gifts, in a banquet whose feast is analogous to the sharing of the Trinity's *perichoresis*.

In this light, Sykes's "sacramental violence," Desmond's "violent non-violence," Srigley's "inward violence of the self," and even O'Connor's "violence of love," should be properly understood not quite as "paradoxes," but as legitimate *contradictiones in terminis*. For the movements they each attempt to describe, are the movements of a giving which has already undermined the very grammar of violence. The sacrifice of the Eucharist is a gift-exchange in an order which triumphs over every economy of sacrificial violence because it does not cease to be a gift, even in its surrender to the violence which seeks to contain it. The redemptive ascetic self-discipline or suffering one may endure as self-sacrifice, is not primarily a restraining of or a giving *up* of one's desires, but rather is, in the very act of giving them over, a *discovery* of desire's fullest fruition, what Hart has described as "the pleasingness of the other's otherness." In recognition of oneself "as a gift to be restored, an address to be answered," it is the offering again of one's desire as the only gift worth giving to a God who has already proclaimed one desirable.

Thus, O'Connor's "violence of love" cannot constitute in any real way a violence towards the self, but rather its exact opposite: a giving back of oneself as

a gift already received. And this is, as we saw in the previous chapter, the essential movement and objective logic of beauty which can be “known only in the moment of response, from the position of one already addressed and able now to reply” (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 18). As Hart shows, this is the same motion as Israel’s perpetual exodus towards a God who needs no gifts, but who delights in the givenness of his people. It is also the motion of Christ’s return to the Father via the cross, the only motion capable of transforming those violences to which it surrenders, but which, by its very act of self-giving surrender, escapes the forces which seek to suppress it. This then, *pace* Sykes, is the “saving shape” of grace, a shape which in the very act of giving itself resists all attempts to make it shapeless and without form, a shape which becomes embodied again in the feast of the Eucharist and the lived banquet of the Church’s saints. In as much as we partake of this feast, in as much as we recognize beauty’s rhetoric and are recognized by it, we can be readers in the line of the *imitatio Christi.*

Having explored the possibility of using a Christian theology of beauty to offer 1) an alternative to explanations which can only conceive of O’Connor’s art and the audience’s reception of it in terms of violence and 2) a more theologically coherent articulation of the relationship between suffering and revelation, we may now turn to the stories which and the community of saints and martyrs who shaped O’Connor’s own assumptions about reading. My aim in the next chapter

is to not only explore how O'Connor's reading was shaped by her reading of the Sacred Scriptures as she participated in the body of Christ through the celebration of the Sacraments and remembrance of the Saints, but then to suggest that this same vision underlies the assumptions she has about how her own art can shape readers. Furthermore, by observing what Pete Candler describes as the difference between two grammars of reading in light of what we have already said about the possibilities inherent in David Hart's discussion of beauty as "already belonging to the Christian story," I hope to present the possibility that O'Connor's "obedience" could in fact be a freeing posture, one that both allowed her to escape the intrinsic hermeneutical violence characteristic of some recent approaches to her work and enabled her genuine imaginative liberty. Moreover, I hope to show that such an approach both builds on and contributes to previous scholarly discussions which have, for the most part, focused on the "influences" over O'Connor's development of an aesthetic, her sense of how art is made, without paying sufficient attention to those sources which shaped her hermeneutic, her sense of how art is received.

CHAPTER FOUR

The "Difference Ingrained Theology Makes in the Sensibility:" O'Connor as Hillbilly Exegete

> Before we broach the question of whether the Fathers spoke adequately concerning the beauty of revelation, and also the question of what form such a discourse would properly have to take, we must, by way of preamble briefly consider Sacred Scriptures, the very source of theology, which, if not in its entirety, for the most part is a poetical book.
>
> —Hans von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* (41)

> 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.
>
> —Flannery O'Connor *Mystery and Manners* (115)

"In attempting to come to terms with Flannery O'Connor's strange fiction," Sarah Gordon argues in *Flannery O'Connor: The Obedient Imagination*, "we must acknowledge, among a number of significant factors, the importance of O'Connor's own reading and the climate of literary education at the time." "After all," she rightly asserts a few sentences later, "we shape our reading, and our reading shapes us" (84). To discuss the primary influences shaping O'Connor's art, Gordon then turns her attention to O'Connor's literary apprenticeship to both the school of New Criticism and what she calls the Catholic perspective of "incarnational art." In a chapter titled, "The Male Gaze,

the Figure Woman," Gordon carefully weaves together O'Connor's connection to various members of the New Critics and her obvious affinity with some central tenets of literary modernism: namely, to "render" a subject dramatically, to "erase" the personality of the artist from the work of art, and to consider that work, finally, as a self-enclosed, autonomous whole. Then, in a chapter called, "The Gentleman Caller, The Anagogical Imagination," Gordon shows how

> O'Connor found the grounding for her art in the incarnational theory of thinkers like William Lynch. Just as Christ entered the temporal world and redeemed that world, so the incarnational artist uses the here and now, the concrete, as a means of effecting a transcendent vision. (132)

Noting especially the figures which overlap, Gordon rightly observes that O'Connor's own comments about art "argue a curious blend of the tenets of the New Criticism and those of Catholic Christianity" (89). For example, in O'Connor's essay on "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," Gordon notices how "such apparently diverse influences as St. Thomas, the New Critics, Caroline Gordon, Henry James, and Joseph Conrad all have in common their emphasis on the importance of the thing made, 'the good of the written work'" (136). Gordon herself suggests, "The literary lessons of the modern writers and the New Critics' emphasis on the work of art as icon were perfectly consonant with O'Connor's idea of the responsibility of the writer who is Catholic" (131). Moreover, by insisting that "Immersion in the finite is the only means by which art will live,"

William Lynch not only supported O'Connor's rejection of "the Pious Style" and was "congenial to her propensity for satire and dark comedy," but, most importantly, he offered her "a strong theological defense of the tenets of the New Criticism" (142).

What really brings the two together in Gordon's project, however, is that for her, both the New Criticism and the Catholic incarnational aesthetic are equally representative of the "patriarchal tradition" which O'Connor ultimately embraces (and which Gordon herself most definitely rejects, though not always with equal consistency). Thus, Gordon reads early drafts of O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* as

> the author's groping for subject matter consonant with her Christian vision and with the stylistic demands of the New Criticism. Within these limitations, these 'givens,' O'Connor would fashion her own text; it would not be a work of the dialogic imagination, of course, but would speak monologically and unflinchingly from the patriarchal Church and the patriarchal literary establishment. (89)

In her chapter on the influence of and O'Connor's ultimate acquiescence to the "literary establishment," Gordon concludes that "O'Connor indeed learned her literary lessons well:" she "adopts the male gaze; she sees the figure woman" (130). One of the specific characteristics of this male gaze, Gordon posits, is the "western tradition of the male quest narrative," a spiritual journey that is "linear" and

> chronicles the male hero's turning away from the world and its temptations to focus on the end goal, salvation. This pervasive view of spiritual aridity is goal-oriented, as the soul proceeds from disbelief, doubt, or spiritual aridity, and moves through and then beyond the world and the flesh to the spiritual. (92)

What makes this struggle particularly "male," according to Gordon, is that the "flesh," in both literary and Catholic traditions, is typically equated with the female, especially where it is offered as an obstacle or temptation that the male protagonist needs to overcome in order to be saved. For O'Connor, this can be seen especially in her decision to finally abandon an attempt to depict the spiritual quest of a female character (as evidenced in the drafts of *Wise Blood*) or, more broadly, in the ways that her female characters tend to be "reduced" or "flattened" as mere stereotypes or allegorical figures whose primary function in the narrative is in service to the male hero's quest. Thus the great irony is, for Gordon at least, that despite "the very condemnation of the 'dissociation of sensibility' or Cartesian dualism," which Eliot or Tate propounded and O'Connor clearly embraced, "these writers use abstraction and polarizing language even to decry abstraction and dissociation" (96). Somewhat surprisingly then, Gordon concludes that O'Connor's "great success" (though it is unclear in what sense she means this) is "the result of the sometimes torturous, always difficult struggle of her own words to embrace the flesh, to affirm the

very physicality that her background, her education, and her church often asked her to deny" (130).

One way the Church asked O'Connor to deny this physicality, Gordon seems to suggest, is that not only does it associate "the fallenness of humanity with images of woman," but it offers an aesthetic in which "the concrete world (flesh) is penetrated by the artist's vision (the divine)—very much in the way that Christ as God/man entered or penetrated the temporal and offered the fallen world the possibility of salvation" (132). Thus, Gordon suggests that the structure of O'Connor's stories functions as a kind of "gloss on the incarnational view of art in that the central female sensibility is approached by the 'gentleman caller'—the messenger who brings the Word from Christ the 'suitor'—and is thereby offered salvation." In "one metaphoric pattern," then, the female sensibility is "penetrated—or, at the very least, she is entreated or 'courted' by God through Christ" (133). This pattern becomes especially apparent, says Gordon, in O'Connor's use of irony and wordplay, by which she draws attention to the limits of our own fallen language and the widening gap "between the Word and our words. She turns our mortal language inside out—with the view to making us *see*." This is, in fact, what it means to practice "an incarnational art," Gordon suggests, and it is "an essentially masculinist aesthetic, calling for an essentially male perspective or gaze. Not surprisingly, O'Connor adopted the

anagogical vision, espoused by the patriarchal Church, and embodied that belief in her art" (133).

At this stage in Gordon's argument, it is sometimes difficult to understand how O'Connor could both "embody" an "incarnational aesthetic" (in following the modernist/New Critical axiom to immerse herself in the concrete) and simultaneously be rejecting "the flesh" as essentially female. What Gordon really seems to be rejecting though is a depiction of the "incarnation" (and less clearly, "the anagogical" by association) as necessarily always "penetrating" the concrete, a word which clearly always connotes, in her use of it, a quasi-sexual violation of a person's freedom. Gordon thus associates the verb with the "stern, judgmental, often punitive deity" that she finds in "the Old Testament and the patriarchal Church" (168).

In her reading of "A Circle of Fire," for instance, she suggests that by drawing a connection between the wounded land and the possibility of the women being sexually violated, O'Connor's "vision is clearly in keeping with Old Testament narrative with its emphasis on the hurt or the wound that is inflicted on the spiritually deaf and blind"—whereas, significantly, the New Testament offers a vision of "healing and recovery" (168). "Surely," Gordon adds, "the use of the female to suggest the flesh's frailty and dependence is traditional in the patriarchy and would have come 'naturally' to O'Connor"

(168). Thus, Gordon's rejection of a violent or violating incarnational model is made a bit clearer when she (somewhat surprisingly) admits,

> I cannot help wishing for more of [Gerard Manley] Hopkins's view in O'Connor's work, for more of the sense of God's presence in the world—as Christ, the God incarnate whose spirit imbues the "meanest" sparkling tree, the speckled cows, and, we are to assume, the most tainted flesh. (169)

Perhaps what is most fascinating about Gordon's own embrace of Hopkins, an artist who surely wrote from within the patriarchal tradition as much as anyone, is that the verb describing the motion of the incarnation ("penetrating") has been replaced with the word "imbues." Here, Gordon associates what we might then call an imbued incarnational model with the New Testament and suggests that, in this story at least, O'Connor by contrast "seems at times to be almost sneering or contemptuous." For, even as we might "question whether Mrs. Cope's sins are sufficient to warrant such a violent comeuppance," we are reminded of the Old Testament figure of Job, who "is forcibly reminded of his creatureliness through a series of wounds inflicted by God" (170). Gordon thus tends to see O'Connor as an author who, much like Gordon's Old Testament god, arrogates the authority to punish her creation, often from motivations which at least appear to be contemptuous, if not outright malicious.

To take another example: in her analysis of the ending of "The Displaced Person" she observes, in a bit of a contrast to her previous explanations, that

"The priest brings the Word—not the clichéd, self-serving fallen language of a fallen humanity—to the humbled soul, and we have every reason for optimism that […] Mrs. McIntyre is receptive to God's grace" (192). Gordon clearly views the priest as another "Gentleman caller," but she does not immediately equate this with the violating anagogical imagination she has described earlier. She does, however, suggest that this story in particular is "successful in large measure because O'Connor trades on the conventional idea of woman's role" (again, it is not clear what kind of "success" she is referring to). And, agreeing with readers who feel that Mrs. McIntyre gets portrayed as one who "oversteps her bounds as a woman," Gordon suggests that while O'Connor "checks her own impulse toward rebellion [presumably against the patriarchal subordination of woman] *by punishing* Mrs. McIntyre, we may also conclude that the assertive, manipulative woman proved an apt vehicle for O'Connor the Catholic in describing our human arrogance in ignoring the suitor, the lover who is Christ"(193 emphasis mine).[1]

But exactly how Mrs. McIntyre can be read as both "receptive to God's grace" and "punished" by a suitor who is in some sense a "lover" is never fully

[1] This accords with another example, where Gordon, citing approvingly of Asals reading of "Greenleaf," agrees "that Mrs. May, because of her refusal to surrender, is fatally punished" (195).

explained, though Gordon does lament in the paragraph following that O'Connor "did not challenge the subordinate role of woman." The image Gordon draws on to illustrate this subordination is therefore striking:

> [O'Connor] found in the idea of woman's dependent status a compelling metaphor for the soul's necessary dependence on God, a yielding that is epitomized in Mary's words at the annunciation: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). (193)

Clearly Gordon interprets Mary's "dependence" as yet another instance of the patriarchal "Gentleman caller" image, and yet she does not consider the possibility that, within the tradition itself, a priest's function is almost entirely derivative from (even "subordinate" to) Mary's function as the first Word bearer, the only one who literally knows what it means to be incarnated with Christ. Both the virgin Mary and the priest in O'Connor's story not only serve the exact same function, but Mary is also the exemplar *par excellence* for all those who would seek to *bring* the Word—not just those would receive it. Moreover, Mary is obviously a New Testament character and it is hard to see how her dependence" and "yielding" is any different than the kind of "imbued" spirit of God incarnate Hopkins observes and expresses.[2]

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[2] Coincidentally, in one of her letters, O'Connor speaks of the virgin Mary by way of Hopkins. In describing the negative effects her cortisone treatments were having on her ability to sleep, she admits, "I was starving to go to sleep. Since then I have come to think of sleep as metaphorically connected with the mother of God. Hopkins said she was the air we breathe, but I have come to realize her most in the gift of going to sleep. Life without her would be equivalent

Nevertheless, while examples like these might make it easy to dismiss Gordon's articulation of Catholic "incarnational art" and the "anagogical imagination" as misleading (or at least another form of the "abstraction" Gordon rejects), my intention rather is to suggest that she is very nearly right. Indeed, we should attribute the lack of clarity or ambivalence we perceive in her argument to the fact that Gordon is such a good student of O'Connor, is so familiar with her work and is always so careful not to simply co-opt O'Connor's own perspective and twist it to meet the needs of her approach. With Gordon, I too affirm that O'Connor is shaped by what she reads, and that the aesthetic vision she offers in her prose and letters is clearly a synthesis of the New Criticism and the Catholic Church's teaching—though, as we shall see, they are not quite "perfectly consonant" with one another. For O'Connor and the Christian tradition, Christ is indeed a gentleman caller (if we may be allowed to invoke this image with no implication of subterfuge, manipulation, or coercive sexuality) and he comes to all of his creation as a lover—though, again, he does not merely *transcend* the flesh (Gordon: Christ "moves through and then beyond the world and the flesh to the spiritual") but rather takes it upon himself and then *transfigures* it to reveal its truest beauty and glory, despite the various ways we

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to me to life without sleep and as she contained Christ for a time, she seem to contain our life in sleep for a time so that we are able to wake up in peace" (*HOB* 112).

ourselves continuously subject it to violence and attempt to move "through and then beyond" it. Mary is indeed the model for the interpretive posture O'Connor herself adopts and hopes to precipitate in her readers, a posture which I argue poses no contradiction to her tough-minded rejection of the sentimental or "Pious style." Moreover, this posture is not just the outcome of her reading of the Scriptures, but of her being formed by the form of the sacraments themselves and the lives of the saints who bear the Word in their flesh. O'Connor does indeed use irony and wordplay to turn our world as readers inside out and draw attention to the gap between our words and the Word. And though O'Connor as artist devotes herself first to "the good of that which is made," because her notion of the good is grounded in a Christian conception of truth and beauty, I argue that this poses no essential contradiction to her concurrent hope that her stories will make her readers *see*—that they will become receptive, subordinate, dependent even, like Mary to the Word and in turn, bear that Word to the world.[3]

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[3] If indeed it is accurate to call this a "monologic" vision, as Gordon does, then understanding that vision from within the way it articulates itself seems not only a prerequisite for those who value a "dialogic" encounter, but, if what I've already suggested about beauty is true, a genuine encounter with that self-articulation will show itself ultimately to be a kind of "monologic" proclamation in favor of the "dialogic" (though to put it that way is perhaps to use the language of critics who have used Bakhtin rather than Bakhtin's language itself).

Moreover, I wish to engage seriously what I take to be the genuinely Christian impulse of Gordon's critique and to take up the real challenge she poses to our understanding of how O'Connor's art works and what sources shaped her as a reader. Failing to do so is, as I've suggested already, not only to too-easily dismiss the real challenge Nietzsche and Ivan Karamazov pose, but to ignore the resources—the stories—for offering a response which already belongs to the peaceful rhetoric of the Christian narrative. For, if indeed the God of the Bible, even of just the Old Testament, ultimately demands an obedience that is a fundamental violation of ourselves, we are, as Gordon would be, right to reject it. And if indeed God or O'Connor "punish" their creations in the same way that, say, the Pinochet dictatorship punished those who refused to acknowledge the regime's capricious sovereignty, then, by the standards Gordon herself promotes, we should say instead that she has been *too* charitable and has in fact not done enough to reject, even denounce, the "demands" O'Connor's art makes on its readers.

Where Gordon's argument and my own might reach an insoluble impasse, however, is in Gordon's abiding assumption that obedience necessarily implies reduction or limitation, that subordination is antithetical to freedom and always requires the diminishment of a self. In her epilogue, Gordon acknowledges that her title is "intended to suggest something of an oxymoron—

the paradox by which the devout Catholic writer creates and explores the fictive worlds and yet works within the limits of faithful obedience to the hierarchical church" (245). For Gordon, this "oxymoron," moreover, is a product of a kind of "tension" whereby "the imagination, by definition free-ranging and risk-taking, is reined in by the teaching and guidance of the Church" (245). Gordon is of course aware of (and often quotes) O'Connor's repeated insistence that Christian dogma "in no way limits my freedom as a writer and that it increases rather than decreases my vision" (*HOB* 147), but throughout her work it is clear that she simply does not embrace that possibility, that O'Connor's "*obedient* imagination" can be thought of as a genuine paradox rather an oxymoron. For Gordon, "obedience" must always implicitly bear the burden of scare quotes. In the end, though Gordon (somewhat surprisingly) seems quite willing to consider the results of O'Connor's embrace of patriarchal institutions an artistic "success" and speaks admirably of O'Connor's talent throughout, she is, nevertheless, still clearly resistant (even putting aside questions of authorial intent) to the demands O'Connor's art itself might then imply for her as a reader. [4]

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[4] Gordon's own hesitancy to fully criticize a perspective which she clearly disagrees with, perhaps reveals the kind of inherent violence and limitations of attempts to tolerate everything except intolerance, or of efforts to, as David Hart might put it, tell the story that there are no more stories. She explains, "The Church is the institution whose values O'Connor espouses, and therefore […] the raw materials of history and region and personality are subordinated to that institution, rather in the way that the medieval scholastics views art as the hand maiden to philosophy. The imagination must learn obedience." Her struggle to both criticize the

And yet, even here, from the standpoint of Christian theological aesthetics it is possible—essential even—to affirm at least Gordon's definition of the imagination as "free-ranging and risk-taking." One might say that such a response could itself be an echo, a manifestation of the gratuitous, almost reckless, boundary-crashing motion that David Hart ascribes to beauty. In positing freedom as an intrinsic quality of the imagination, and in resisting a vindictive, malicious notion of Divine author-ity, Gordon's argument may—without, one hopes, enacting a violence against it—be thought of as 1) an expression of the very tradition of which it is so skeptical and 2) propaedeutic for considering the way the Christian Scriptures shaped O'Connor as a reader and her hopes for her own readers.[5]

"institution" without herself "subordinating" someone else comes through in the very next lines: "If I seem to be belaboring the obvious here, I am simply attempting to account for and even to justify "orthodox" readings of O'Connor and, at the same time, to suggest that other readings, even other Christian readings that might be labeled "heretical" in light of the standard O'Connor herself set, are nonetheless possible" (216). While it is clear that O'Connor and an adequate understanding of "the tradition" would also welcome—even encourage—other "possible" readings as a manifestation of rather than a challenge to the Trinity's endless economy of gift-giving, the one reading Gordon's assumptions can ultimately sustain with any degree of internal logical coherence, is that no one can (or should) even say what is and isn't justified. That is, above all, one cannot admit the possibility of there being such a thing as "heresy." It seems perfectly clear that throughout her career, O'Connor presciently understood this as a handcuffing of one's intellectual and artistic freedom.

[5] In her essay on "The Catholic Novelist in the South," O'Connor might appear to contradict this when she emphatically asserts that "the imagination is *not* free, but bound." Her point though, as the context makes clear, is that a writer must "encounter and engage" the cultural "forces" which have shaped her view of the world first, "and it is when this is a true engagement that its meaning will lead outward to universal human interest" (*CW* 856). In other words, only by accepting and engaging its limitations, can the imagination find its true freedom

In order to avoid implicating beauty or its apprehension with a far weaker (though more common) notion of freedom as *license*, however, it is crucial that we acknowledge first that beauty's liberty, its "free-ranging" and "risk-taking" motion, depends on and grows out of the Trinity's community of reciprocal exchange. That is to say, without an understanding of Christ as himself the manifestation or form of "a dynamic coinherence of the three divine persons, whose life is eternally one of shared regard, delight, fellowship, feasting and joy" (Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* 155) or of the Church as the ongoing embodiment and witness of this form, when we speak of freedom it must always imply only a freedom *from* something rather than the freedom *to do* or be a part of something. Only in light of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and of Christ as the form of such beauty, of a theology of a God who needs nothing and in whom knowing and being are one, could obedience serve to increase rather than decrease one's vision. Only in the light of Christ who is the firstborn of creation can we conceive of a Word (and the word) "penetrating" apart from its now common association with violence.[6] And, only in light of a Christian conception of beauty

to explore elsewhere. I take this to be consonant with my own argument, and Gordon's impulse to define imagination as freeing, though, of course, her notion of "freedom" is radically different.

[6] Moreover, one might suggest that the negative connotation is itself a tragic commentary about and a consequence of the ways our cultural understanding of sexual freedom reflects a more general history of divorcing sexual intimacy from the Trinity's infinite reciprocity of giving.

such as the one we encountered in the previous chapters, can we conceive of an art, of a form, of a grammar, of a rhetoric whose persuasion not only does not make use of violence but refuses to be contained by it. Otherwise, Gordon is quite right: subordination is a fundamental violation of one's autonomy. But this is precisely the point that O'Connor's stories, by just being stories, seem to be making—that apart from a vision of reality that is "bigger than oneself," that continues to expand one's sense of Mystery, every assertion of the self's freedom, every proclamation, and every interpretative act must ultimately involve the violation of another and enact a primal, inescapable violence.

It is, of course, far easier for one who has never really had to undergo the humiliation and injustice of systemic subordination, to preach the many virtues of obedience and to present it as a model for living—that is, to present it as a genuine paradox or mystery rather than an oxymoron. And, we should soberly admit as O'Connor herself repeatedly does, that the church's overall record in these matters does little to commend itself; its history is one of consistent misuse and abuse of its authority to commit heinous violations against personal freedom and human dignity. For those who are all too aware of the Church's gross misdeeds, I suspect O'Connor's repeated defense that, nevertheless, "principle must be separated from policy," will offer little, if any, consolation (*HOB* 99). But if one can at least admit the possibility that Christ's example brings healing and

restoration, as Gordon seems quite willing to do at times,[7] then we must also acknowledge that Christ himself, his formal beauty, offers and invites subordination through his own example—a concrete, flesh-embracing example, moreover, that constitutes not an aberration of or violence against his nature, but rather its genuine manifestation and therefore, within a proper Christology, a genuine manifestation of what it means to be human. Indeed, it is only in light of this *kenosis* that one can say, with Jeffrey and Maillet, that "Story as a means of wisdom is at the heart of Scripture itself, and nowhere more so than in the teachings of Jesus, surely the chief exemplar for Christian poets as well as critics" (311).

Thus, to even begin to comprehend how it is that O'Connor could say she was grateful as an artist and reader for the "service" the Church offers in sometimes forbidding "the faithful to read a work without permission" (*MM* 149), we need to first understand how her "reading" of the Bible along with and through the saints and the sacraments enabled her sincere conviction that

[7] Another example found in a chapter in which Gordon laments the lack of healthy communal relationships in O'Connor's fiction and the ways O'Connor herself failed to engage (or criticize) social issues, echoes both Gordon's radical Old Testament/New Testament distinction and her own positive appraisal of Christ: "[…] that Rayber considers the old man to have been 'ruled' by love implies a definition of love that would seem to subordinate human relationship and human connection to the dictates of a fierce and demanding God who must constantly be satisfied with our allegiance. This deity is, of course, far closer to the commonly held view of the wrathful and punitive Jehovah of the Old Testament than to the New Testament Christ, who, in what could surely be called the greatest example of mutuality the world has ever known, gave his life for the fallen creation" (218).

“dogma is only a gateway to contemplation and is an instrument of freedom not of restriction. It preserves mystery for the human mind” (HOB 91). Indeed, O’Connor’s presupposition that dogma could preserve mystery is the first point of contrast which sets her apart from most articulations of a “modernist” aesthetic, and I suggest that we can discover the sources that shaped such a wildly counterintuitive claim in not just her reading of the Old Testament accounts of Abraham, Jacob, and Job or her reading of theologians like Romano Guardini, but in her participation of the Church’s sacraments. Doing so, moreover, seems prerequisite for understanding the true import of O’Connor’s statement in her letter to Cecil Dawkins: “The only places you can really avoid the Pious Style are in the liturgy and in the Bible; and these are the places where the Church herself speaks…" (*HOB* 370). Not only does it illuminate O’Connor’s sense that, “In contrast to the pious language of the faithful, the liturgy is beautifully flat,” (*HOB* 91) it also draws our attention to O’Connor’s crucial Augustinian epistemological and hermeneutical assumption, that “you must believe in order to understand, not understand in order to believe” (*HOB* 370).

To really conceive of the possibility that O’Connor’s experience of freedom is genuine, intellectually coherent, and not merely the self-deception of one who, as Gordon suggests, is blinded by the Church’s “assertion of infallibility” (187), however, we may need to re-consider our own hermeneutical

presuppositions, or at least admit (in light of Peter Candler's work) that the Body of Christ offers an alternative model—an entirely different grammar—for reading than the one most of us now take for granted. We must also, in light of Hart and von Balthasar, be able to admit the possibility of Christ as the form and exegesis of beauty, such that he is both the lens and end of our reading of Scripture; conceive of the church—despite its many failures to live up to the name—as the body of Christ and therefore the ongoing manifestation and interpretation of beauty; have a notion of a God who is gift and whose gift will not cease to be so in our rejection or suppression of it; and finally, cultivate an imagination free enough to consider beauty's persuasion of the will and cultivation of desire as in increase of one's liberty rather than its restriction.

Two Competing Grammars and The Reasonableness of Abraham: Radical Orthodoxy's Response to a Radical Hermeneutics

In an early letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor offers a series of critical judgments which are clearly pertinent to the questions we have posed. On November 10, 1955, O'Connor replies to Hester's comments about a painting by 19th century French painter Jean-Loius-Ernest Meissonier and George Clay's short story "We're All Guests." Regarding Meissonier, O'Connor admits that "I don't know enough about art to appreciate the purely formal qualities." Nevertheless, she says, "I think I approve of distortion but not of abstraction.

There is at least enough I can recognize in this that I would be willing to stand around and let it have its way with me" (*HOB* 115). Readers familiar with O'Connor's letters and prose will no doubt recognize O'Connor's growing confidence in articulating a distinction between "distortion" and "abstraction" as a means through which an artist can communicate her view. Many readers will also notice a fairly typical reluctance from O'Connor to assert her own authority as a critic of not just the plastic arts, or music, but even in regards to other works of fiction.[8] But even critics like Sarah Gordon, for whom O'Connor's comment could certainly add fuel to her argument, have tended to overlook the significance of O'Connor's assumption that art, at least worthwhile art, could have "have its way" with her. We will soon have opportunity to clarify what exactly this means for O'Connor (despite its mostly negative connotation) and to invoke other instances where she assumes this somewhat passive posture as a

[8] Though O'Connor does offer literary advice and is usually pretty direct in her criticism, her letters are full of examples where she undermines and qualifies her aesthetic judgments, often by drawing a distinction between her responsibility as an artist and that of the critic. But O'Connor's March 3, 1954 letter to Ben Griffiths offers an example that also suggests O'Connor admitted to herself that she could never just be an artist—that, as she says elsewhere, moral judgment is always" implicit" in what the artist sees (*MM* 30). Even in demurring from her responsibility as critic, her criteria for not only artistic production but artistic apprehension—right reading—becomes evident: "When you start describing the significance of a symbol like the tunnel which recurs in the book, you immediately begin to limit and a symbol should go on deepening. Everything should have a wider significance—but I am a novelist not a critic and I can excuse myself from *explication de textes* on that ground. The real reason of course is laziness." (*HOB* 70).

recipient of art. For now, it is enough to merely a draw a clear link between that comment and what she says later in the letter.

In the next paragraph, O'Connor disagrees with Hester's declaration that Clay "has no talent" as a writer. "I just think that is all he has," O'Connor says. But the real problem with his story, she suggests, is that it "wasn't related to anything larger than itself. He has written me that he believes that the highest thing the writer can do is to explain the reasonable man to himself." O'Connor clearly suggests that this as an insufficient, not to mention solipsistic, aesthetic and goes on to explain that Clay's definition of "reasonable" is ultimately "a legal concept, […] juries try to decide if the reasonable man would act thus and so, etc." Rejecting Clay's definition, O'Connor declares that *her* reasonable man "is certainly something else—God's reasonable man, the prototype of whom must be Abraham, willing to sacrifice his son and thereby show that he is in the image of God Who sacrifices His Son" (*HOB* 115). Though we should be appropriately cautious of making too much of one letter, it is telling that in a letter full of so many aesthetic implications, O'Connor definitively allies herself, her aesthetic, and her conception of reason not just with an Old Testament character, but with a way of reading that story that is clearly indicative of the

way she reads the Scriptures (and perceivable reality) as a whole.[9] Much in the same way that, as we saw in the last chapter, Hart understood Abraham's story as a critique and complete reorientation of the logic of necessary "sacrifice," so too O'Connor conceives of Abraham's willingness to obey as in fact a genuine affirmation and manifestation of his true personhood and freedom. And while such a realization can never be stated simply or apart from mystery, when considered in light of O'Connor's vast reading in not just literature or theology, but also philosophy, psychology and history, we can at least begin making the case here that one of, if not *the* most significant influence shaping O'Connor's assumptions about what it means to apprehend art is her reading of the Christian Scriptures.

To speak of O'Connor's "reading" of the Scriptures, however, requires some immediate clarification in so far that it implies (as I think it does for so much of the way we approach questions of exegesis today) that she comes to a text as an individual and leaves it as an individual with whatever interpretation she may be able to justify to herself as "reasonable." Rather, what we find is that

[9] The rest of the letter receives far more attention in O'Connor criticism for her admission that *Wise Blood's* "failure" as a novel was that Motes "is not believable enough as a human being to make his blinding himself believable for the reasons that he did it. For the things I want them to do, my characters apparently will have to seem twice as humans as humans." Significantly, O'Connor's resolve for what she can do as an artist echoes the passivity of her earlier comment regarding her appreciation of Meissonier's painting: "Well, it's a problem not solved by the will; if am able to do anything about it, it will simply be something given."

for O'Connor our ability to read texts and the world rightly is always influenced by not only the "community" of other texts we read, but also the community of readers whose judgment and wisdom can offer a kind of "rule" under which our own reading can both be measured and *regula*ted. For O'Connor, this includes both the saints and the sacraments, in that they convey the incarnate body of Christ, the Word made flesh—that word which both speaks all things into existence and calls all things back to itself. Thus, to assume one can accurately interpret the world and its texts solely according to one's own lights is, for O'Connor, clearly "unreasonable."

Much like O'Connor and similar to David Hart's account of theological aesthetics, Peter Candler's fascinating work on *Theology, Rhetoric, and Manuduction* calls into question our modern assumptions about what is or is not "reasonable" by drawing our attention to the difference between two "grammars" of reading. In his discussion of the "grammar of representation," Candler persuasively demonstrates how both technological and theological shifts led to a way of reading that is analogous to our modern notions of reading a map. As with a map, in the "grammar of representation" a reader receives no actual information about where she is, but must instead always locate herself as someone "other than" the text: "the perception of the whole is like understanding how the pieces of a puzzle fit together, which requires the posture

of the map-reader: one stands above and observes the whole and the relationship of its constitutive elements" (26). But precisely because by this "logic" a reader knows that "where I am on the map corresponds to and represents where I already know myself to be" (21), theological topics can become "abstract units containing information which is to be imparted to the reader, ultimately for the purpose of teaching others by means of the printed word alone" (26). Thus, this shift towards representation ("by which words and images literally represent things, truths, ideas, in a mode of strict correspondence" {23}), Candler argues, results in the divorce between form and content, the instantiation of "new dualisms like 'scripture' and 'tradition,'" and the further "ghettoization of theology as a discrete realm, apart from other autonomous sciences of philosophy, rhetoric, metaphysics" (22).

Because of new printing technologies[10] and a radical transition in the assumptions about what knowledge was and how it could be communicated, "Scripture" and "Tradition" eventually become, "two mutually opposed, yet

[10] I.e. "The invention of the printing press therefore makes possible the isolation and hypostatization of the biblical texts as the sole authority for Christian theology, as well as the abstraction of these texts from the way they are used in Christian worship and in the continuing interpretive tradition. The possibility of sola scriptura is thus parasitic upon the new understanding of the Bible as a physical "thing" whose spatial limits are quite clearly defined" (15).

ostensibly 'secure,' receptacles of a content which would be fixed onto the page" (27). Candler explains that here, for the first time, the Bible is understood

> as a 'book' in abstraction from its liturgical usage. That is to say, the Bible becomes present in the life of the church as a physical object, which is identically repeatable in every instance, as opposed to an ongoing story continually performed and re-narrated in the liturgy. (18)

Furthermore, this move "displaces memory from its central function in the theological imagination," as the role of a text shifts away from being a kind of mnemonic device or aid, and implies rather "the immediate relation of the reader and the page" (18). Having removed from the Scriptures the glosses of the church fathers, "The 'tongues' (glosses) or voices of the Church, in whom the biblical text and its interpretation are bound together in Eucharistic *anamnesis*, have now been silenced" (27). And in this way, Candler suggests, "Tradition now becomes *a thing to be interpreted* rather than the act of interpretation itself" (29).

Similarly, because knowledge becomes "not the product of continuing and unfinished exegesis, but the result of a simple encounter, of an *observation* by means of which the reader 'takes in' the text" (30), for Candler, hermeneutics "becomes a universalized technique for making sense of any book, a general method of reading which can be applied to any text whatsoever" (31). Such a technique, "assumes that there is no relation between the form and the

presentation," for "Signs now signify within a language which we already know, which we already speak. It is no longer the case that our respective traditions make intelligible, by practice, the interpretation of analogical relations" (31). Perhaps echoing David Hart's critique of "indifference," Candler concludes,

> Representation assumes a neutral and unequivocal register across which descriptions can be ferried from a code or tableau of knowledge to the mind, regardless of the temporal identity of the mind or the temporality of texts themselves, which print is supposed to have overcome. Representation, then, is a matter of immediate apprehension by virtue of an exterior sign, and is removed from the variables of time and human communities. As such, representation is the fundamental philosophical and theological strategy of modernity. (34)

Opposed to this "panoptic" theology of "immediate apprehension" in which knowledge is something that can be contained, transposed, or transferred so long as one possesses the right "method" for making sense of the map (whose boundaries are imposed by the page margins and which exists externally and beneath the perceiver's gaze), however, is what Candler calls a "grammar of participation." For Candler, this refers to "the way in which texts are organized as structures for the manuduction ("leading-by-the-hand") of readers along an itinerary of exit and return from creation to eschatological beatitude." In this model—one which begins with the Thomistic insistence that any apprehension of

truth "shares in the knowledge God already has of himself" (4)[11]—the reigning metaphor is that of an *itinerary* rather than a map, for above all it seeks, "through its peculiar arrangement of textual material, to communicate, that is, to 'bring into common,' by drawing the reader into a prior community of interpretation and by attempting to lead the reader to a goal which is both textual and ontological" (34). And this means that, for the Christian, not only is the goal ultimately a participation in the "community" of the Trinity's *perichoresis*, but that the lines between author, reader, and commentator are often blurred because the "act of production (whether in reading or writing) is itself a form of participation [in the Trinity], in that nothing is made by human hands or minds but which shares in the divine activity of creation *ex nihilo*" (17).

Thus, at least within the context of glossed texts or most pre-sixteenth century works in theology, such an approach suggests, for Candler, "that reading itself is liturgical, that the antiphonal *sic et non* of text and interpretation requires the anamnesiac orientation of memory through the learned texts towards its goal in God" (35). As with a traveler who has been given an "itinerary" for a journey,

[11] "Insofar as God's knowledge is one with his being, to participate in God's self-knowledge is at the same time to participate in his being. Thus to grow in knowledge is to grow in being, to come *to be* more truly. […T]he causing of knowledge in another is a participation in the teaching activity of God in two ways: one, by analogously "causing" the potential knowledge to be made actual knowledge; and to, by instructing the learner in what he or she did not know before. In both of these ways, the teacher 'imitates' God, whose prerogative alone it is to cause knowledge." (4)

in order to reach the end goal, a reader must not only remember the steps but "perform" them—which is to say, that the knowledge she gains is always also a form of becoming. (This too is a form of participation in the Trinitarian God for whom knowing and being are always one.) In these kinds of texts, the form and structure—sometimes the layout of the page itself—explicitly intends for the reader "not simply to learn more about God, but to be led toward God—an activity which, like all knowledge, is unfinished and mediated" (44). Candler refers to this as the "pedagogy of manuduction" and describes, for instance, how for Thomas Aquinas the teacher-writer's goal is to draw "the reader toward the 'memory of heaven,' where the soul learns the proper object of its desire, and indeed, gets a glimpse of it" (44).[12] Indeed, for Bonaventure, memory is the very thing which enables one to "participate" in God's self-knowledge, for what a reader learns "is not a deposit of immutable data about the "supreme Being" inscribed upon the mind but rather an absorption in the imperishable unity of God, who is ultimately the object of all language" (46.) Thus Candler concludes that the ability to rightly read "the biblical texts is an art learned not through the strenuous exercise of a solitary mind, but rather from the use of the Scriptures in

[12] Speaking of what we might call the rhetorical strategy of Aquinas' *Summa,* Candler explains elsewhere that, "The object is not to transfer data from the page to the reading mind, but rather for the reader to engage in an imaginative performance of the text in the memory, which is not to say, in "recall," but in that activity which orders the mind towards its proper object, namely the wisdom which is the Son of God himself" (48).

the liturgy" (50), and ultimately requires the "'art' of conforming one's will to the likeness of Christ, by virtue of the 'baptism' of understanding, which is transformed into wisdom, indeed the very wisdom of God himself, the Son of God" (51).

While much more could be said about Candler's project, the crucial distinction he makes between the two "grammars" of interpretation is immensely fruitful for understanding not just O'Connor's attitude or posture as a reader, but also her sense of how her own art could shape her readers. His argument provides us with a language that is capable of articulating O'Connor's apprenticeship in both literary and liturgical settings without suggesting that she, as an artist, violated either her subject or her audience's conscience. For even though on the surface there may appear to be a natural congruence between the modernist's dictum to "render" and what Candler calls a "grammar of representation," what becomes increasingly clearer is that for O'Connor, one way to identify art which is "wholly concerned with the good of that which is made" (*HOB* 157) is that it allows the audience to *participate* with the text in much the same way that Candler describes.

One might even say that in O'Connor's aesthetic the form of story itself employs this very "grammar of participation," for the reader (as opposed to one who merely consults Spark Notes) is never given the whole map, but is rather

enjoined to take up the itinerary of the text and to, in a way, “perform” the telling of the story again as the various facets—the twists and turns of the plot, the characters—become part of her memory. In this way, a true reader of the story (as opposed perhaps to a certain form of literary critic) is always in the process of becoming since there is no other way to really know the story without participating in it.

At very least, the form of knowledge Candler describes as being “unfinished and mediated” is clearly analogous to the kind of knowledge O’Connor, as artist, hopes to lead her reader to. In an early letter to Hester, O’Connor offers a crucial explanation of her understanding of not only the role of belief, but the Church’s means of conveying doctrine.

> […T]he individual in the Church is, no matter how worthless himself, a part of the Body of Christ and a participator in the Redemption. There is no blueprint that the Church gives for understanding this. It is a matter of faith and the Church can force no one to believe it. When I ask myself how I know I believe, I have no satisfactory answer at all, no assurance at all, no feeling at all. I can only say with Peter,[13] Lord I believe, help my unbelief. And all I can say about my love of God, is, Lord help me in my lack of it. I distrust pious phrases, particularly when they issue from my mouth. I try militantly never to be affected by the pious language of the faithful but it is always coming out when you least

[13] Significantly, in commending the response of a father in the Gospel of Mark who says, “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief,” O’Connor refers to it as “the most natural and most human and most agonizing prayer in the gospels,” though she does, we should also admit, erroneously attribute the words to Peter (*HOB* 476). Her confusion nonetheless suggests O’Connor’s willingness to attribute agonizing doubt to the head of the Church.

> expect it. In contrast to the pious language of the faithful, the liturgy is beautifully flat.

For O'Connor, the Church offered no blueprint which by its very form might "force" one to believe. What it offers instead is participation in a language that, precisely because it is "beautifully flat," can lead one on to a beatific vision. And while it is difficult for one whose usual posture towards a text is as one reading a map or completing a puzzle to fathom the possibility, this form of "manuduction" need not imply the kind of didactic moralizing O'Connor herself decried. The two grammars Candler describes and the distinct assumptions these imply about what a text is and how one comes to understand (or stand under) it, enable us to see how O'Connor's art could serve a pedagogical purpose by itself avoiding the "Pious style" in favor of the "beautifully flat," by leading, shaping, and cultivating one's desires for that which is truly desirable—that is, by the very act of being "wholly concerned with the good of that which is made."

For if, as O'Connor would have learned from Aquinas, what humans know is always a participation in "God's knowledge of himself," then, as Candler suggests (in concordance with our previous discussions of Hart and Milbank), knowledge

> must become embodied not only in the way which one thinks about God, but also in the particular textual form in which such though is made present to the reader, and in the form of Christian pedagogy which understands its task not to be the mere impartation of information about God, but a real leading into the

> Trinity. Thus to know, under this mode, is an ontological endeavor—one comes to know more truly only by "being" more perfectly, and therefore by loving more rightly. (44)

Indeed, one of the implications of Candler's argument is that divorcing a pedagogical end, i.e. Wisdom, entirely from the creation of texts is itself a product of this representational shift (theological as well as technological) which assumes that a text can be contained on the page. As with the theologian who in rejecting the Eucharist as a real localization of the body of Christ must, ironically, then "localize" the Word of God as being identical to the text of Scripture, so too modern literary criticism has tended to enshrine the "verbal icon" of a story—even if what one is supposed to do as a reader is to merely "resist" it. In this case, however, the meaning of "icon" has also been removed from its liturgical context and comes to mean something far more static and self-contained, rather than an image through which one is led without ever going beyond it and which requires an apprenticeship to a tradition before it can be either created or apprehended adequately. But for O'Connor, it seems clear that as an author, she has no interest in creating a literary idol, and that as a reader and interpreter of her world, she makes no pretenses to having simply located herself on her map or simply "taking in" a text as bits of information. Rather, she is, as I think she intends for her readers to be, always on a journey, following an itinerary in which she is led on by a community of readers, saints, and the sacraments,

towards a glimpse of that eternal beatitude whose end is always a new beginning.

Perhaps nowhere else is O'Connor's intrinsically communal hermeneutic better illustrated than in the scene from *Wise Blood* in which O'Connor draws at least a genealogical connection between nihilism and a modern Cartesian assumption that the individual mind is the ultimate arbiter of reality. So far Haze Motes is the one and only member of his "Church Without Christ,"[14] but then his first "disciple" shows up and begins trying to use Motes's platform to earn some money. He calls himself Onnie Jay Holy (his real name is Hoover Shoats) and one of the first things he says to the curious onlookers is, "I'm telling [you my name] so you can check up and see I don't tell you any lie. I'm a preacher and I don't mind who knows it but I wouldn't have you believe nothing you can't feel in your own hearts" (*CW* 85). That Shoats's trust-worthiness and authority as a preacher is also derived from nothing more than what he feels in his own heart is of course hilariously highlighted by the fact that first thing he

[14] In Arthur Kinney's catalog of O'Connor's library, he notes that O'Connor wrote "HC of CWC" in the margins (p.163) of Baron von Hugel's *Letters to a Niece* where von Hugel describes an encounter with Principal Jacks, the head of the Unitarian College in Oxford, who "distressed me, by printing in his paper that a belief in a Beloved Community (= a Church without God) was quite equivalent, as a motive for morality, to faith in God." Though O'Connor's *Wise Blood* had been published a few years before, it seems clear that she associated the Unitarian minister's assertion with Motes's "**H**oly **C**hurch of **C**hrist **W**ithout **C**hrist" (Kinney and O'Connor 25, ent. 46).

does is tell a bald-faced lie.[15] That this epistemological autonomy has a real appeal for his audience, moreover, is made clear when he gives three reasons why the audience should "trust" his church:

> In the first place, friends, you can rely on it that it's nothing foreign connected with it. You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it. […] I want to tell you a second reason why you can absolutely trust this church—it's based on the Bible. Yes sir! It's based on your own personal interpitation of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpit your own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpited. That's right," he said, "just the way Jesus would have done it. Gee, I wisht I had my gittarr here […] That ought to be enough friends, […] but I'm going to tell you one more, just to show I can. This church is up-to-date! When you're in this church you can know that there's nothing or nobody ahead of you, nobody knows nothing you don't know, all the cards are on the table, friends, and that's a fack! (*CW* 86)[16]

Shoats's sales-pitch sermon is, of course, a farce on several levels, but one of the obvious points the novel draws out here is that even if Haze is unwilling to recognize it, his gospel that there is no gospel clearly has a kinship with Shoats's own manipulative message and its central assumption that "you don't have to

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[15] It is no coincidence that Hoover Shoats lies about his name, for as we shall see in later chapters, O'Connor felt that the primary responsibility of an artist was to accurately name the world she perceived. In more ways than one, it is all the more appropriate then that when the reader finally hears his true name, the reader will almost certainly know him for the "vacuum" salesman that he is.

[16] O'Connor's own words offer the best description of this scene: "In my own experience everything funny I have written is more terrible than it is funny, or only funny because it is terrible, or only terrible because it is funny" (*HOB* 135).

believe anything you don't understand."[17] And though Shoats's promotion of "your own personal interpitation of the Bible" clearly comes off as ridiculous in this story (with or without a "gitarr"), in reading this scene we are prompted to also admit that in many ways we, as "interpiters" of art, are also one of Shoats's kin. We are, after all, inheritors of Descartes *cogito.* For, to the degree that we sympathize with Gordon's "dismay" at O'Connor's "willingness to allow the Church […] to restrain the artist's freedom to explore, at least in as much as freedom to read what she pleases is essential to that freedom of exploration,"[18] we know that for most of us, Shoats's message certainly seems far more "reasonable," not to say appealing, than Abraham's own response to the divine Word.

[17] Hart's critique in his chapter on the "Optics of the Market," is all too fitting in our discussion of Shoat's market dealings and our broader assumption that desire involves possession rather obedience: "Here one sees the necessary, if not always immediately apparent, synonymy of consumerism and nihilism: in our "society of the spectacle" (to use Guy Debord's phrase), the open field where arbitrary choices may be made among indifferently desirable objects must be cleared and then secured against the disruptions of the God; this society must presume, and subtly advocate, the nonexistence of any higher "value" than choice, any truth that might order desire toward a higher end; desire may posit, seize, want, not want—but it must not obey" (433-4).

[18] What Gordon is alluding to is O'Connor's well-documented attempts to obey the Catholic Church's official censure of certain texts. As a Catholic reader, O'Connor not only obeyed but often defended the Church's actions, at times even describing the Index as a "service" they provided. In at least one notable example O'Connor sends a note to Father J.H. McCown asking for his permission to read André Gide and Jean-Paul Sartre. O'Connor's reasoning here is typical: "All these Protestants will be shocked if I say I can't get permission to read Gide"(*HOB* 259, 263).

For O'Connor, though, such a "restraint" of her freedom was eminently reasonable and was, moreover, a point in which she as an artist clearly departed from most of the "patriarchal literary establishment." But such a departure, I am suggesting, should not primarily be attributed to O'Connor's admirable "rebelliousness" or even conceived as merely a kind of philosophical principle she found herself willing to assent to. Rather, it is the product of a lifetime of interpreting and being interpreted by the Biblical stories—though obviously, to reverse the exegetical "direction" and suggest that a story might "have its way" with the reader rather than the other way around will already seem "foreign" to the ways we generally think about such things. Admittedly, such a thought already is asking us, unlike Shoats, to believe *before* we approve of or understand it. But this, the story seems to say again and again, is indeed the logic, the reasonabless of Augustine and the tradition's *credo ut intelligam.*

For O'Connor, it is clear that this kind of interpretive imagination was clearly the product of being shaped by the church and that in many ways she hoped her own stories would have a similar effect—not in spite of being, but *because* they were "well-made stories." In her essay on "The Catholic Novelist and the Protestant South," O'Connor famously contends that

> To be great storytellers, we need something to measure ourselves against, and this is what we conspicuously lack in this age. […T]hese guides have to exist in concrete form, known and held sacred by the whole community. They have to exist in the form of

> stories which affect our image and our judgment of ourselves. Abstractions, formulas, laws will not serve here. We have to have stories in our background. It takes a story to make a story. (*MM* 202)

And for O'Connor, the story that enabled her, and other writers from the South, to "make a story" was clearly the Christian Scriptures:

> The Hebrew genius for making the absolute concrete has conditioned the Southerner's way of looking at things. That is one of the reasons why the South is a storytelling section. Our response to life is different if we have been taught only a definition of faith than if we have trembled with Abraham as held the knife over Isaac. (*MM* 203)[19]

As O'Connor describes the peculiar rhetorical persuasiveness of storytelling, it is crucial to remember that she is not just describing the power myths in general have to shape our imaginations and the ways we experience reality. What *kind* of myths we have, what their specific content is, and what they say or do not say about the significance of the concrete or about *where* the real lies and *how* it can be apprehended, obviously matters too.[20] And while critics have already

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[19] That the Bible stories could be genuinely persuasive without simply communicating abstract, propositional definitions or employing rhetorical violence, and, moreover, that the Scriptures did so by inhabiting the realm of the concrete, is an approach to the Old Testament that O'Connor likely found in her readings of Claude Tresmontant's *A Study of Hebrew Thought*. In Chapter 4 we will turn especially to Tresmontant's emphasis in Hebrew culture (and a thought O'Connor underlined in her reading of Tresmontant) on the "metaphysics of individuation […] illustrated by the significance of the proper name in the Bible" (qtd. in Kinney 22).

[20] But to even have to make that clarification is perhaps already a manifestation of a hermeneutic which assumes, often unconsciously, that the content can be separated from the form—that there is a way of knowing which exists independently from its mode of expression. What O'Connor is indirectly suggesting here is that the *form* of story itself—the very quality

adequately acknowledged the significance of this essay for understanding O'Connor's "theory" of aesthetic production, we need to emphasize here that, for O'Connor, the biblical stories become not just something to be interpreted but rather a way of interpreting everything; not only do those stories condition "our way of looking at things," but, as she says a bit later, they allow "the meaning of their every action to be heightened and seen under the aspect of eternity" (*MM* 203).

Similarly, in her essay on "The Nature and Aim of Fiction" O'Connor makes it clear that exegetical principles do not apply exclusively to interpreting texts and that the artist's ability to create depends significantly, if not entirely, on the quality of vision that is granted to her by her hermeneutical assumptions. Thus, the medieval commentator's approach to Scripture "was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities" (*MM* 72).[21] And such an "enlarged view of the human scene," the

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which makes a story a story—undermines, resists, and refuses to be contained by any epistemology which presupposes the abil ity to encounter or apprehend things in an abstract way. By drawing distinctions between the grammars we take for granted, what Hart and Candler enable us to see is that this critique of certain kind of metaphysics is itself a product of O'Connor's having to learned to read texts with and within a tradition.

[21] Similarly, in a letter to Charlotte Gafford, a young graduate student, O'Connor offers her own "way of approaching the subject of grace" as an example for how the student might approach discussing "religious terms" with her thesis director: "The writers whose point of view is Catholic in the widest sense of the term reads nature the same way the medieval commentators read Scripture. They found three levels of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text—the allegorical, in which one thing stands for another; the moral, which has to do with what should

kind borne out from the "anagogical vision" practiced by medieval exegetes, would need to be cultivated if an artist "is ever going to write stories that have any chance of becoming a permanent part of our literature" (*MM* 73). Accordingly, for O'Connor, as both an artist and interpreter, the Bible serves as "an instrument to plumb meaning" (*MM* 204). And the specific meaning she finds in Abraham and Isaac's story, as we have seen, is not just a model of a story-born faith—though this is not insignificant—but the very picture of what it means be made in the image of God and therefore what makes most sense, what is most "reasonable" when we say what it means to be human. Clearly such "reasonableness" is radically opposed to the trustworthy subjective "interpitation" Onnie Jay Holy hopes to capitalize on.

To speak, then, of what it means to be a perceiver, an interpreter, an apprehender, is for O'Connor impossible apart from the Biblical stories. In fact, her insistence that Dogma preserves mystery is closely associated with the biblical story of Job. In an another essay in which she asserts that "It takes readers as well as writers to make literature," (*MM* 181), O'Connor laments the quality of typical Catholic readership and says, "We Catholics are very much given to the Instant Answer. Fiction doesn't have any. It leaves us, like Job, with

be done; and the anagogical, which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (*HOB* 468–7).

a renewed sense of mystery. St. Gregory wrote that every time the sacred text describes a fact, it reveals a mystery" (*MM* 204). If we observe the original passage O'Connor had underlined in her copy of *An Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas,* we see that she is drawing an analogy between the particular rhetoric of the Scriptures and that of fiction: "On the contrary, Gregory says: Holy Scripture by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery." (qtd. in Kinney 72, ent. 225). To read either the Scriptures or a novel properly, then, is to acknowledge its "manner of speech," or as Hart and Candler might say, to know and accept its mystery-increasing, non-representational "idiom." O'Connor thus implicitly offers Job as a significant exemplar for what it would look to read a novel correctly, to approach or participate in a text in such a way as to allow the mystery to continue expanding.[22]

Moreover, O'Connor's reading of Job as a reader of mystery, serves to highlight how badly some readers misread O'Connor when they describe her

[22] If we can again assume an analogy between the artist's vision and the vision required for apprehending art, another, though less explicitly biblical exemplar for O'Connor's hermeneutic can be found in her reading of the story of Jacob who "struggled" with an angel all night before finally receiving his blessing. Speaking of the influence the South exerts, O'Connor says, "The writer must wrestle with [the image of the South], like Jacob with the angel, until he has extracted a blessing. The writing of any novel worth the effort is a kind of personal encounter, an encounter with the circumstances of the particular writer's imagination, with circumstances which are brought to order only in the actual writing." Notably, the most heavily marked chapter in O'Connor's copy of the *Holy Bible: Douay Version* is Jacob's story in Genesis 31 (see Kinney 39).

aesthetic means as a form of divine contempt or vengeance. For whether or not one reads Job's story from within the tradition, any reader of the story must at least acknowledge that a major part of the "plot" itself draws attention to how badly Job's friends have misread both Job's situation and God's role in the story. When Gordon compares Job to O'Connor's Mrs. Cope and wonders whether her "sins are sufficient to warrant such a violent comeuppance," (170) she commits the very same mistake that the story—in perhaps the only part that is not mysterious—clearly shows Job's friends to be making.[23] But maybe this is in itself only further proof that good fiction, as with the stories in the Bible, does not offer, does not even allow any "Instant Answers."[24]

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[23] A passage O'Connor underlined in her reading of Claude Tresmontant's *Toward the Knowledge of God*, itself offers an uncanny refutation of Gordon's tyrant-like God and her tendency to read (or misread) the two Testaments separately: "The wrath of God is actually the love of God, intolerant of vanity, injustice, the crime of man against man, and against Himself. How badly the Bible has been read if we believe that the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath and strictness, quite devoid of love! And how badly the New Testament has been read if we have not found on every page something of the wrath of God and the warning of God! In both testaments the same wrath and the same love are expressed, the same wrath expressing the same love" (qtd. in Kinney 49). Moreover, it suggests again that Hart's exegetical assumptions from an earlier chapter are consonant with O'Connor's own.

[24] By contrast, Pope John Paul II's commentary on the Job story in his Apostolic Letter "Salvifici Doloris" (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering) is itself evidence that he has indeed heard the story's warning against making hasty conclusions and models the kind of "unfinalizing" approach that Gordon clearly values without also implying that the Bible can be "interpited however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpited." Especially given our interest in previous chapters on the nature of redemptive suffering, it is well worth observing several steps of his explanation: "Job, however, challenges the truth of the principle that identifies suffering with punishment for sin. […] In the end, God himself reproves Job's friends for their accusations and recognizes that Job is not guilty. His suffering is the suffering of someone who is innocent and it must be accepted as a mystery, which the individual is unable to penetrate

Indeed, a great number of the underlined or otherwise marked passages from the books in O'Connor's library are specifically concerned with mystery as a true form of knowledge. In her copy of an *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas* O'Connor also noted these lines:

> "…and [the Scripture's] truth so far remains that it does not allow the minds of those to whom the revelation has been made, to rest in the likenesses, but raises them to the knowledge of intelligible truths. […] The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds, and as a defense against the ridicule of unbelievers, according to the words, *Give not that which is holy to dogs* (*Matt*. Vii [1:6])." (qtd. in Kinney 72)

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completely by his own intelligence. […] The Book of Job is not the last word on this subject in Revelation. In a certain way it is a foretelling of the Passion of Christ. But already in itself it is sufficient argument why the answer to the question about the meaning of suffering is not to be unreservedly linked to the moral order, based on justice alone. The Book of Job poses in an extremely acute way the question of the 'why' of suffering; it also shows that suffering strikes the innocent, but it does not yet give the solution to the problem. Already in the Old Testament we note an orientation that begins to go beyond the concept according to which suffering has a meaning only as a punishment for sin, insofar as it emphasizes at the same time the educational value of suffering as a punishment. […] But in order to perceive the true answer to the 'why' of suffering, we must look to the revelation of divine love, the ultimate source of the meaning of everything that exists. Love is also the richest source of the meaning of suffering, which always remains a mystery: we are conscious of the insufficiency and inadequacy of our explanations. Christ causes us to enter into the mystery and to discover the 'why' of suffering, as far as we are capable of grasping the sublimity of divine love. In order to discover the profound meaning of suffering, following the revealed word of God, we must open ourselves wide to the human subject in his manifold potentiality. We must above all accept the light of Revelation not only insofar as it expresses the transcendent order of justice but also insofar as it illuminates this order with Love, as the definitive source of everything that exists. Love is: also the fullest source of the answer to the question of the meaning of suffering. This answer has been given by God to man in the Cross of Jesus Christ."

Similarly, in her copy of Saint Augustine's *Confessions*, she notes one of his first encounters with the Scriptures:

> "But behold, I see a thing not understood by the proud, nor laid open to children, lowly in access, in its recesses lofty, and veiled with mysteries; and I was not such as could enter into it, or stoop my neck to follow its steps. For not as I [now] speak, did I feel when I turned to those Scriptures." (qtd. in Kinney 73)

O'Connor then notes a later encounter Augustine had with the text, though this time with a double marginal lining:

> "… while it [Scripture] lay open to all to read, it reserved the majesty of its mysteries within its profounder meaning, stooping to all in the great plainness of its words and lowliness of its style, yet calling forth the intensest application of such as are not light of heart; that so it might receive all in its open bosom." (qtd. in Kinney 74)

And these are just a few examples; in her readings of such varied sources as the mystics, analytic philosophers, literary criticism or even of Jungian philosophy and Zen Buddhism, the comments O'Connor very often highlights are in some way concerned with the inadequacy of propositional knowledge and the opportunity or responsibility inherently presented in mystery. But it is most clearly in the writings of Father Romano Guardini (a German priest and theologian whose writings greatly influenced the Second Vatican Council) that we find the explicit, careful articulation of the view that Dogma could not only preserve Mystery but that it was essential for cultivating true freedom of the individual will.

One of the first of Guardini's books to be translated into English is a collection of twelve essays written during World War II titled *The Faith and Modern Man* (1952). Aptly anticipating Gordon's critique, in his essay on "Dogma" Guardini notes the difficulty the term causes now for those both inside and outside the Church: in our modern use it seems to imply a contradiction to a healthy "living" religion, to the vital "inwardness" of faith, and to the "freedom" proclaimed by the Gospels (112). For Guardini, however, dogma becomes a way of speaking of "the complete fullness and freedom of God," in light of the fact that this revelation has "become particularized," not just in Christ, but in the people who received this revelation in "a particular time," who "spoke a particular language" (114).

Rather than fix limits on "particular" interpretations of God's freedom and fullness, what dogma does, he suggests, is hold together the truths of each of these particular approaches in a productive "tension." Using the debates concerning Christ's nature which led up to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 as an example, Guardini argues that in this specific formulation of dogma, "The truth contained in each [viewpoint] is recognized and conceded, in such a way, to be sure, that each comes under the criticism of the other, and is thereby held in right proportion" (118). Perhaps sounding rather like Bakhtin (whom Gordon and so many other O'Connor critics admire), Guardini says that the kind of

"unity" achieved is not simply bringing two numbers under a "common denominator," but is more like "when pressure and counter-pressure achieve balance so that a living tension ensues, a tension which arches and supports." And while this tension finally "explains […] nothing" —in an exhaustive or totalizing sense—it nevertheless makes "one realize how fathomless the mystery is." Contrary to how it is often characterized, dogma's primary purpose, then, is "safeguarding and emphasizing the mystery" (118).

Moreover, according to Guardini (and significantly for our discussion of O'Connor), dogma properly conceived does not merely displace reason, but rather "issues from the strenuous work of reason, but rightly so, for reason, too, belongs to the life of faith." Rather than acting as a substitute for faith, or worse, a force which compels in spite of or against reason, as so many assume it does, "Dogma summons reason into the service of the faith and charges it with defining exactly the content of the truth under consideration, and of expressing it clearly. In this way religious truth is protected from the ambiguity of mere experience" (119). Crucial to this concept is Guardini's anti-Shoatsian insistence that dogma "is the product of the Church" and not of any one person: "The question is not one of ability, or of majority decisions, but of authority located where God Himself places it, namely, in the teaching authority of the Church" (121). Dogma thus calls "heresy" what most people today call dogma: "the

arbitrary selection of certain aspects of sacred truth." For dogma, properly conceived, "is like a wall built about a sacred source to keep the contents from running out, or an iron band surrounding the mystery to hold it intact." (120).

From this perspective, the greatest "danger" to Mystery is the individual human will, even those within the church, for the human tendency is always "to make the divine conform to his own image, and for that very reason he falls victim to the narrowness of his own vision." And it is within this context that we should understand O'Connor's constant (and to some, annoying) insistence that that the direction her fiction "has been because of the Church in me or the effect of the Church's teaching, not because of a personal perception or love of God" (*HOB* 92). O'Connor is not just explaining her "influences" or simply being modest here; she is also always offering a critique of the assumption that the individual mind can ever truly be autonomous or that it can "make" anything on its own. For Dogma preserves what is reasonable from the kind of violence inflicted on it by the likes of Onnie Jay Holy's "personal interpitations." And perhaps paradoxically—at least for post-enlightenment conceptions of liberty—Dogma also preserves the individual person from the limitations, the "narrowness" of his or her own apprehension of reality: "Revelation frees him from this by commanding him, and enabling him, to construct his religious existence not according to his own thought and experience, but according to the

word of the Lord of the world" (Guardini 122). For, in this sense, "'Revelation' does not mean that God is offering a high truth for man's contemplation, but that He is proclaiming who He is, and in doing so, demanding of man assent of heart and mind, adoration and service." As with Hart's conception of the non-violent "suasive loveliness" of beauty, what Revelation does is speak that truth which allows one to fully become who she or he really is. For Guardini, then, the very means by which dogma preserves mystery—what "Revelation" by definition does—is demand obedience, for the sake of one's freedom. Only after one obeys, does dogma turn "its other side:"

> Before the decision, the dogma appeared only as a law […]; afterwards it shows itself as breadth and fullness. […] As soon as he obeys, it moves behind him, behind his mind, his eyes. It becomes something from which, and through which, everything else is seen, a mental ordering a feeling for right direction, a light which illumines his view. (123)

In light of this we might say that dogma prompts the *credito* which enables the *intellego*. Or, to use Candler's metaphors, what dogma offers is not a map of everything but rather an itinerary in which the knowledge gained is inseparable from its performance. Not surprisingly, then, in her copy of George Tavard's *Transiency and Permanence: The Nature of Theology According to St. Bonaventure*—a book O'Connor elsewhere says "ought to be in every Catholic hand and paw" (*HOB* 189)—she underlined this passage: "From the theological tradition St.

Bonaventure received the Augustinian principle that the Word is the Sun of the mind, the light thanks to which created spirits are able to see intellectually" (46).

And readers familiar with O'Connor will no doubt recognize her use of this same metaphor of an illuminating light by which we see—or don't see—everything. Repeatedly in *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor reminds her readers that in order to see distortion or to recognize something as evil or grotesque, one needs, as it were, the appropriate lighting (26, 30, 33, 91). Often, she suggests, this can only come through "the light of the Christian faith," and on at least one occasion she employs the imagery to clarify what she means by a "Catholic" novel:

> what we roughly call the Catholic novel is not necessarily about a Christianized or Catholicized world, but simply that it is one in which the truth as Christians know it has been used as a light to see the world by. This may or may not be a Catholic world, and it may or may not have been seen by a Catholic. (*MM* 173)

Similarly, In her letters, O'Connor repeats a familiar contention that "you are only enabled to see what is black by having light to see it by" (HOB 179), but also corrects Betty Hester's conception of the Catholic artist's view of his audience:

> What the Catholic fiction writer must realize is that those who question [the Catholic faith] are not insane at all, they are not utterly foolish and irrelevant, they are for the most part acting according to their lights. What he must get over [across] is that they don't have the complete light. (*HOB* 290)

Both O'Connor and Guardini would thus seem to agree with David Hart that both a Christian hermeneutics and a Christian aesthetics is essentially "[…] a labor of vision—to see the form of Christ, to see all creation as having been recapitulated in him, and to see in all other persons the possibility of discerning and adoring Christ's form in a new fashion" (*The Beauty* 342). And because, as Hart says, aesthetics necessarily implies "an order of seeing that obeys a *story* of being" (343), what determines one's freedom to imagine or see is precisely the kind of story one tells. If that story must begin and end with what one already "understands or approves of" in so far that it rejects outright the demand placed upon it by other stories, then what we discover is not "freedom" at all but rather a solipsistic hell. (This, as we will see in the final chapter, is the compelling narrative of *The Violent Bear It Away*.) As Nietzsche so convincingly showed, in this post-enlightenment narrative of being, the greatest affirmation of one's sovereignty, the ultimate freedom of the individual must eventually find its truest expression in suicide and self-destruction. But if a story of being proclaims first the gift of self and delight in the other which is infinitely multiplied and cannot be contained by violence, if that story already demands the delight in and infinite possibility of further story-telling, then one's obedience or subordination must by any definition constitute its freedom. As Guardini says in an earlier chapter on "God's Dominion and Man's Freedom":

> For God's power is love. God's will is love. By directing His love toward man, God enables man to become what he essentially was meant to be—a free person. The more actually a man is led by God's love, the more fully he realizes his true self; the more immediately a man's acts spring from love, the more completely they become his own. (*The Faith* 33)

Something like this, we should say, is what O'Connor calls the "reasonableness" of Abraham and the Mystery-increasing posture she found in Job. And perhaps nowhere else is this better explained than in a passage O'Connor underlined in another of Guardini's works titled *Freedom, Grace and Destiny*. In it he offers a thorough response to the hermeneutics of the Onnie Jay Holys and, not surprisingly, it requires both a dogmatic interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures and a theological aesthetic of God as artist or maker:

> Modern ethics argues that when man obeys God's commandments he becomes heteronomous, belonging to someone outside himself, whereas freedom fundamentally consists in autonomy, in perfect self-dependence. But this argument understands freedom as absolute freedom and thus equates human freedom with Divine freedom. Were that the case, obedience to God would certainly take away human liberty. But in fact, God alone is God; man conversely, is His creature. Man's freedom is a created freedom and it therefore develops essentially before God and in subordination to Him—all the more so since God is not only creator of being but also ground of truth and source of good. In consequence, obedience to God does not signify subjection to superior power but the fulfillment of what is right and good. […] When I obey, I am acting in conformity with my true nature and so, rightly understood, I stand in my proper position within myself. (82–83)

As we have seen, it is precisely this understanding of freedom which animates O'Connor's repeated assertion that the dogmas of the Church preserved mystery and enabled her to have the necessary freedom to see and to create as an artist. And it goes without saying that O'Connor was drawing on this when, for example, she encouraged Betty Hester to postpone becoming a member of the Catholic Church until she could be sure it was "an enlargement" of her freedom (*HOB* 93); or when she admits to Cecil Dawkins that "discovering the Church is apt to be a slow procedure but it can only take place if you have a free mind and no vested interest in disbelief" (*HOB* 231); or when she exhorts a young Alfred Corn to "cultivate Christian skepticism. It will keep you free—not free to do anything you please, but free to be formed by something larger than your intellect or the intellects of those around you" (*HOB* 478).

That O'Connor herself submitted to the authority of the Christian Scriptures and their ongoing exegesis through the body of Christ (the saints as much as the sacraments) seems to me uncontestable—even Gordon and other critics with a similar skepticism towards the content of O'Connor's faith readily agree. Moreover, that she considered her own artistic production of stories as both responding to and reflecting back on, in genuine dialogue with, the stories of the Bible, seems a justifiable conclusion given the evidence. But deciding whether one can or should even acknowledge such an "influence" in articulating

not just O'Connor's aesthetic framework but the demands these implications make on us as interpreters of her stories is a much more tenuous project. Precisely because in both her reading and in the creation of art, O'Connor assumes not only that dogma will increase mystery, but that in order to even fathom this possibility one's will must be already in some sense aligned with the divine author's intent, one can never fully be "convinced" unless one has already to a degree been persuaded by the reasonableness of the argument's conclusion. For the argument, by its very nature, cannot be understood merely propositionally. To be able to follow the premises, one must have already have, at least partly, understood the truth of the conclusion. [25] There simply does not and cannot exist one conclusive "proof" that could persuade someone like Gordon that "subordination" and "obedience" could in fact be freeing. In order for Gordon to verify this claim, she would already have to admit, even

[25] But the logic of such an argument, I suggest, is not circular or solipsistic in the strictest sense, though it must be said it indeed offers a different assumption about reason, a different grammar for knowing, and can perhaps be understood best by analogy to the ways we come to know love. Love's "reasonableness," as both teenagers and celebrants of "golden" anniversaries know well, does not involve an orderly progression from premise to conclusion, but rather proposes something much more complex, disordered, unpredictable and yet, somehow more real than anything else we "know"; something more like a banquet (or a dance) in which the feast is never understood simply as the arrival of one moment, the sum of which is merely the logical, inevitable consequence of a series of postulates. Rather, it invokes the entire movement of giving and receiving wherein each exchange is just as much a feast as the whole though those exchanges themselves do not make much sense apart from the context in which they found their expression.

tentatively, the validity of its conclusion. She would, as Guardini says, already have to be on the other "side" of dogma.

As we have seen, it is nearly impossible for us, given our modern hermeneutical presuppositions, to conceive of a text as having an effect on its reader without implying that in some way the reader's will or reason has been violated. We inhabit too deeply (or one should say, too shallowly) the "grammar of representation," and enjoy the panoptic prerogative this affords us, to imagine our being led on by a text as anything other than a loss of self. To be sure, O'Connor was always rightly wary of propaganda posing as art and of thinly-veiled moralizing or argumentation in the shape of a story, but that does not mean she believed that good art was incapable of serving a genuine pedagogical end or teaching wisdom. For stories, like wisdom, are always a form of lived out knowledge, and the fact that they can move or lead a reader, need not always imply a rhetorical violence. At very least, Milbank's warning against the inherent violence of mere spectatorship should give us pause before we assert that if texts are unfinalizable, then we are, as readers of texts, above all untouchable.

Moreover, to engage again the debate over "authorial intention" seems somewhat beside the point, not only because one of O'Connor's explicit intentions was to have her readers read the stories for themselves, but because as

Wayne Booth shows in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* the author's "intent" can never be fully separated from the work of art itself. Are not all narrators, whether reliable or unreliable, omniscient or first-person, in some ways always the product of at least an artist's intent to make something beautiful and to say something that is in its own way true and good? Can "intention" only be applied to comments that exist outside the work? Obviously, no one is suggesting that external commentary become a substitution for reading and interpreting the work of art itself, but to pretend the author's experience, motivations, vision of reality do not in any way influence what we may or may not be able to perceive, seems to be just as misguided and itself a product of our modern tendency to dissociate or abstract the "message" from the medium.

Thus, to really offer someone like Gordon a compelling reason for adopting O'Connor's hermeneutical posture, one might, at best, be able to point to the "success" of O'Connor's stories as stories themselves and suggest therefore the possibility that such an artistically fruitful vision would likely be similarly fruitful for the apprehending art as well. In the end, however, if what O'Connor says about Dogma and what Hart says about beauty is true, perhaps the only truly persuasive account must come from within the stories themselves. For O'Connor's stories, I am suggesting, are themselves always proposing through the suasive rhetoric of beauty a kind of concrete "reasonableness," the lived out

logic of stories and the insufficiency of our “personal interpitations.” To both read and make a story, one must always rely on other stories and thus stories, by their very nature, “argue” against any attempt to finally “liberate” oneself from the demand stories place upon us. In the same way that beauty’s gift remains a gift in spite of attempts to suppress it, stories point to our essential dependence on story, even to proclaim the end of all stories.

CHAPTER FIVE

"The Accurate Naming of the Things of God:"
John Hawkes' Second Skin, "Parker's Back" and the Ontological Basis of Poetry

> Blessed are the legend-makers with their rhyme
> of things not found within recorded time.
> It is not they that have forgot the Night,
> or bid us flee to organized delight,
> in lotus-isles of economic bliss
> forswearing souls to gain a Circe-kiss
> (and counterfeit at that, machine-produced,
> bogus seduction of the twice-seduced).
> Such isles they saw afar, and ones more fair,
> and those that hear them yet may yet beware.
> They have seen Death and ultimate defeat,
> and yet they would not in despair retreat,
> but oft to victory have tuned the lyre
> and kindled hearts with legendary fire,
> illuminating Now and dark Hath-been
> with light of suns as yet by no man seen.
>
> J.R.R. Tolkein excerpted from "Mythopoeia"

> No matter whether I give a name to, or hear the name of, a strange bird; no matter whether I write or read a line of great poetry, form or understand a scientific hypothesis, I thereby exist authentically as a name or a hearer, as an "I" or a "thou"—and in either case as a co-celebrant of what is. But when names no longer discover being but conceal it under the hardened symbol, when the world comes to be conceived as Alice's museum of name-things: shoes and ships and sealing wax—then I am bored. I exist as an ought in the center of the picture-book world of the *en soi*.
>
> Walker Percy, "Naming and Being" (*Signposts* 135)

In the preface to his major critical work on John Hawkes' fiction, Patrick O'Donnell offers an *apologia* that is nearly ubiquitous among Hawkes' readers and could easily be mistaken as a commentary on Flannery O'Connor:

> […] Hawkes is a "difficult" writer who purposefully disrupts and undermines the contexts and boundaries of normal reader expectations. Oftentimes, his subject matter is repulsive, involving various forms of violence or scenes of degradation which turn many away. In short, he violates the reader, for very clearly defined reasons as we shall see, in such a way that his work has become controversial, his motives questioned. (ii)[1]

Indeed, when O'Donnell explains a few pages later that "Hawkes's tendency is constantly to assault the reader," no doubt readers with even a passing familiarity with O'Connor criticism—including more recent interpretations—will immediately associate the two artists.[2] And yet it is also plainly evident that despite their nearly identical readerly receptions, critical interest in Hawkes' work would amount to only a fraction of the scholarly work in O'Connor

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[1] For similar perspectives on Hawkes' work, see especially Stanley Trachtenberg's *Critical Essays on John Hawkes* (1–4), Frederick Busch's *Hawkes: A Guide to His Fictions* (xvi–xxi), Lesley Marx's *Crystals out of Chaos* (29), Oberbeck's "John Hawkes: The Smile Slashed by a Razor" (46–47), and Donald Greiner's *Comic Terror: The Novels of John Hawkes* (xi–xix, 10–11) or his *Understanding John Hawkes* (5).

[2] Examples of other similarities abound. In at least one interview Hawkes describes his artistic intention in ways that bear more than a passing resemblance to O'Connor's complaint that her readers never got her intended humor: "With *Second Skin* I was determined to write a comic novel, and I think more readers took it as comedy, though students still appear to care more about the horror than the comic elements of *Second Skin*" (Kuehl 172). His comment is especially reminiscent of her famous complaint that her readers were more interested in "counting the dead bodies" than actually reading the stories themselves (*MM* 113).

studies. The difference is so great in fact that one suspects Hawkes is actually now more famous as a critic of O'Connor than as a novelist in his own right.

Of course, as O'Connor herself repeatedly reminds us, mere popularity in itself reveals next to nothing (if not something negative) about the actual artistic merits of a work.[3] Nonetheless, because it has been understood almost axiomatically that both writers perpetrate a kind of violence against their audiences, a closer examination of their aesthetic presuppositions in the context of their artistic creations reveals crucial differences that should compel us to refine, even redefine, the way violence functions in O'Connor's art and how we articulate the redemptive role of readerly suffering. By reading O'Connor's "Parker's Back" in light of Hawkes' best known novel, *Second Skin*—a story that explicitly draws the reader's attention to the significance of names and naming things, functions as a kind of portrait of the artist, and, perhaps not altogether coincidentally, also includes an account of the protagonist's receiving a tattoo—I suggest that O'Connor offers a prescient indictment of the aesthetic solipsism and hermeneutical violence that characterizes much of the "postmodern" art and of which Hawkes' work is clearly representative.

[3] See, for example O'Connor's review of Morris L. West's *The Devil's Advocate*: "The best seller list is a standard of mediocrity through which occasionally a work of merit will slip for reasons unconnected with its quality. […] This book is well worth reading for its virtues and we have its faults to thank for its being read so widely." (80)

Especially in light of John Sykes's contention that when Obadiah Elihue Parker (a name loaded with consequence which Parker himself reluctantly begins to recognize) "literally takes on Christ in the form of the tattoo, […] it allows him to join in Christ's pain" (52), Hawkes' novel offers a way to make crucial distinctions even as it points to a kind of readerly suffering which seems unlikely to precipitate an imitation of Christ. For if, as Hawkes's first-person narrator says in *Second Skin,* names have "no special connotation, no significance," (5) the artist is completely free, even encouraged, to construct, to "create" his own reality by any means necessary in much the same way that the novel's narrator and the various rapists in his story do. And *creating*, of course, always proceeds from a mode or way of *seeing* reality such that what we have to say about the role of the artist will clearly have its consequences for how we describe the interpretive stance in which the art can be received. Thus, from the perspective this dissertation has been tracing on art and the nature of violence, what makes Hawkes' novel so troubling is not so much its dark subject matter—not the numerous accounts of rape and suicide, the murder scene, nor even the narrator's clearly incestuous feelings for his daughter. Rather, it is the fact that by the end of the story, one which Hawkes called his most "life-affirming," a reader can neither affirm nor deny anything other than the narcissistic solipsism of Hawkes' autonomous, self-made, self-corroborating, self-indulging "artist." If

indeed the novel's narrator represents a model for Hawkes' vision of the artist, we may at best conclude that the novel's formal "integrity" as a work of "art" consists ultimately in undermining the very properties which, from the viewpoint of theological aesthetics and the rhetoric of peace, would allow us to call it "beautiful." Precisely because it has rejected any objective or transcendent articulations of the good, even its own implied vision of the "good," Hawkes' aesthetic must simply "create" by destroying—not by calling something into being, but by calling into question being itself.

One can concur with the critics who say that Hawkes enacts a violence towards his readers, even if in their estimation this amounts to something quite positive or aesthetically productive.[4] For both Hawkes' and his narrator's "creative" vision the aim is not to simply startle his audience out of its interpretive complacency, but rather to assert itself as a self-legitimizing, self-authorizing "creator" of a world in which everyone else and everything—even arousing "sympathy" and "compassion" for others—can be used and abused in the interest of self-preservation. Taken to its logical consequence, Hawkes' "art"

[4] Oberbeck: "[Hawkes'] comic treatment of violence, extreme detachment and crackling satire, thoughtful horrors driven though tangles of complex distortions—all combine to unsettle his reader, making him dependent on the author as a guide in this contrary and confusing landscape. Like Faulkner, Hawkes can gracefully subjugate his reader, and […] this delightful violation of a reader's conventional trust is a measure of perverse satisfaction such as a Faulkner or a Flaubert must have enjoyed. How sad that many readers are unable to partake in the perverse pleasures which the novelist invites them to share" (47)

calls its audience not to an encounter with the beauty *of* and *in* being, but rather the absurdity of an existence wherein language itself becomes merely another perpetration of violence, even in its attempt to defend itself against another violence. In Hawkes's putatively sympathy-yielding, life-affirming aesthetic, words do not describe or depict violence; they *are* violence and, as such, are always teetering on the verge of non-being and in-signification. As his comments elsewhere show, in so far as these words enable one to emerge from the restrictions others impose on one's own perspective of reality, this semiotic-violence is for Hawkes always an unmediated good.

"Naming Names:" A Portrait of the Artist and the Violence of Interpretation in Second Skin

A runner up for the National Book Award in 1965 and widely considered Hawkes' most "accessible" novel, *Second Skin* presents a series of sporadic, somewhat disjointed vignettes that form the supposed "highlights" of the narrator's own "naked history" (9). In the first chapter called "Naming Names," the narrator introduces himself first as a "lover" of many things:

> the hummingbird that darts to the flower beyond the rotted sill where my feet are propped, […] bright needlepoint and the bright stitching fingers of humorless old ladies, […] parasols made from the same puffy stuff as a young girl's underdrawers […] But most of all, lover of my harmless and sanguine self. Yet surely I am more than a man of love. It will be clear, I think, that I am a man of courage as well. (1)

Having named himself a man of courage and lover of himself, the narrator then proceeds to identify the various characters who will eventually inhabit his story: "Because I suppose that names must precede these solid worlds of my passionate time and place and action" (2).

Among the first to be named of his "once-living or hardly living members of my adored and dreadful family" (3) is his Peruvian-born son-in-law Fernandez who had been married to his daughter Cassandra. Here, the narrator foreshadows the eventual discover of Fernandez (by both the narrator and the readers) dead "on a bloody hotel room floor" (4), though the cause of his death is not revealed until much later. In fact, as readers eventually learn, the question about how much to tell or not tell about this violent scene plays a central role in the development of the narrative itself and is clearly linked to Hawkes's own notion of the relationship between story-telling and violence.

After identifying Fernandez, the narrator mentions Miranda, a name whose meaning (worthy of admiration) and aural allure both provokes and disguises something much more sinister:

> I hear that name—Miranda, Miranda!—and once again quicken to its false suggestiveness, feel its rhapsody of sound, the several throbs of the vowels, the very music of charity, innocence, obedience, love.[…] But Miranda was the widow's name—out of what perversity, what improbable desire I am at a loss to say—and no one could have given a more ugly denial to that heartbreaking and softly fluted name than the tall and treacherous woman. (5)

Unlike her namesake from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Miranda will play the role of temptress and fatal accomplice to the daughter of the narrator, a man named Skipper who throughout his tale envisions himself as a kind of Prospero. But unlike Prospero, the narrator will ultimately escape *to*, not *from*, a "magical" island as part of what he calls his "victory over" Miranda. Thus, only as the teller of the story and from the vantage point of what he often calls his "floating island" can the narrator now say, "to me her name means only the ten months during which I attempted to prolong Cassandra's life, ten subtle months of my final awakening" (5).

Next, the narrator mentions his "mother's prosaic name of Mildred" and suggests somewhat disingenuously that

> Of course the mere name of my mother has no special connotation, no significance, but the woman herself was the vague consoling spirit behind the terrible seasons of this life when unlikely accidents, tabloid adventures, shocking episodes, surrounded a solitary and wistful heart. (5)

Indeed, though Mildred means "gentle strength," the narrator makes it clear that his mother functions only as a "vague consoling spirit," even as he recounts the shocking episode of his mom pouring wax in her ears in order to shut out the sound of her husband, the narrator's father, shooting himself in the family bathroom. As the narrator's story progresses, one gets the sense that his own storytelling, what he refers to as a "waxen tableau," (10) is his own way of

deafening himself to both the "special connotation[s]" and the "terrible seasons" of his life.

But rather than proceeding in a linear fashion, in the chapter that immediately follows we get the story of Skipper, the narrator, being persuaded by his daughter Cassandra to get a tattoo despite his great fear of needles and evident intolerance for physical pain. Chronologically, the tattoo scene takes place only after Skipper discovers Fernandez lying dead, his body mutilated during a homosexual tryst at a cheap motel. But, as with the readers, Skipper is still concealing from his daughter Cassandra the full extent of the story surrounding her husband Fernandez's death. In many ways, much of the drama and tension of the story revolves around Skipper's difficulty narrating the gruesome scene he discovers in the hotel room. As the reader will eventually learn, the narrator both wonders whether Cassandra would have killed herself had he told her the whole truth of Fernandez's death and views his present literary "confession" as a way to possibly make amends (or perhaps as simply a way to keep from killing himself).[5]

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[5] Much later the Skipper regrets not having escorted Cassandra to the gruesome scene so she could "have taken a good look at him with her own eyes." Instead, he delays saying anything at all, and when he does, he omits certain details—details which he now believes (perhaps self-deceivingly) might have kept her from committing suicide: "Yes, I waited those two or three months, and they made all the difference, they tipped the scale, shadings of the true tonality were lost, and certain details were kept to myself. […] A hair's breadth might have kept Cassandra from killing herself, merely a hair's breadth. Now I shall never really forgive myself

In the tattoo-scene chapter, however, as Skipper and his daughter awkwardly slow dance at a run-down "Pacific war" bar while they wait to catch a bus out of town,[6] Cassandra speaks amid his internal monologue: "'Skipper?'—at least she allowed herself to whisper that name, mine […]—'Skipper? Will you do something nice for me? Something really nice?'" Foolishly but as one happily seduced, Skipper replies, "Anything, anything, […] Cassandra, and no one will ever say I faltered even one cumbersome step in loving you" (14). Cassandra then leads him to a "rat-hole" tattoo parlor and secretly convinces the artist—who "was covered-arms, neck, shoulders-with the sweaty peacock colors of his self-inflicted art" (15)—to inscribe in green ink (the most painful color) the name *"Fernandez"* over Skipper's heart "while Cassandra stood by watching, waiting, true to her name" (18). Meanwhile, Skipper undergoes such excruciating pain that it reminds him of an episode (which again, the reader will hear more about later) where he is sodomized during a

the loss. But if I missed those many years ago I won't miss again. So now for everything, for what I told her as well as what I didn't tell her in the upstairs bedroom of the cold island house, everything I can think of now to restore a little of the tonality, to set to rights my passion."

[6] The narrator's description of his daughter here is plainly voyeuristic: "So in the shame and longing of my paternal sentiment, flushed and bumbling, I felt her knee, her hip, once more her breasts […] I glanced down at her head, at the hair pinned up and her neck bare, at her face, the beautiful face which reminded me suddenly of a little death mask of Pascal" (11-12).

mutiny of the naval vessel he commands.[7] His concluding observation, thus, seems more than a little farcical: "There were tiny fat glistening tears in the corner of my eyes. But they never fell. Never from the eyes of this heavy bald-headed once-handsome man. Victim. Courageous victim" (19). But instead of currying favor with his already aloof daughter, his self-humiliating acquiescence has only made her more cold and detached: "I saw with shame and alarm that her eyes were harder than ever and had turned a bright new triumphant color" (20). Because we readers are dependent on the narrator's account, we never know for sure why Cassandra hates her father so much or why he is so willing to comply. But given the fact that, despite Skipper's protest, she repeatedly refers to him as her "boyfriend" in front of the tattoo artist, at this point the reader should begin to suspect that perhaps Cassandra has learned to flip the tables and to employ seduction as a means of punishing him and preserving herself.

Aptly compared to the "erratic flight of the hummingbird," (*Second Skin.* 9) the rest of the narrative gradually unfolds or accrues as the narrator flits back and forth between his past experiences and his "present" position on a "wandering island […] unlocated in space and quite out of time" (*Second Skin.*

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[7] This is but one of many instances where the tattoo artist's needle, a pen of sorts, not only takes on phallic associations but clearly represents an instrument of perpetration and transgression.

46). From this edenic island, wearing "No shirt, no undershirt, no shorts," Skipper can safely recall the traumatic experiences of his past and begin a new life, entirely unfettered by the people, events, and regrets of his past. Here, he has "only to drop [his] trousers […] to awaken paradise itself" (*Second Skin.* 46), and the only physical remnant of his past on this island is the company of "poor dear black Sonny, my mess boy, fellow victim and confidant" (1). On the island, Skipper and Sonny are also joined by Catalina Kate—a young, exotic island-native who throughout the course of the novel is pregnant with either Sonny's or Skipper's child—as well as Sister Josie, a diminutive, gold-toothed girl dressed in a nun's habit "who attends all our births and who remains faithful to some order that has long since departed our wandering island" (49). Most critics and Hawkes himself agree that the Skipper's narrative is ultimately ambivalent regarding the father of Catalina Kate's unborn child.[8] But the answer does not seem to matter much because, especially in contrast to the settings in which other scenes take place, what truly counts is that this "unlocated," "wandering island" is fecund, brimming with all kinds of life, and entirely unencumbered by the preoccupations and restrictions of his former world. Even Sister Josie's

[8] In an essay, John Hawkes makes explicit what other critics have suspected: "Skipper is openly involved in a triangle relationship with his former messboy and their common mistress (Sonny and Catalina Kate, a young island girl) and may be the father of Catalina Kate's newborn negro infant" ("*The Floating Opera* and *Second Skin*" 21).

allegiance to an ancient "order" has been transformed through parody and comic exaggeration into a completely harmless vestige of what Hawkes elsewhere calls the old "repressive" institutions.

Indeed, Skipper has traded in his previous "profession" as a navy man and become instead an artificial inseminator: "I am much esteemed as the man who inseminates the cows and causes these enormous soft animals to bring forth calves. [...] An appealing sort of work, a happy life. The mere lowing of a herd you see, has become my triumph" (*Second Skin* 46). And this "triumph," he repeatedly tells his readers, is over a disastrous, recurring pattern that first began when his father, a mortician, committed suicide, followed by his mother, wife and daughter. Presumably as both the author of this tale and as the self-named "Artificial Inseminator," the narrator assures himself, "haven't I redeemed [my father's] profession, his occupation, with my own?" (46).

The telling of Skipper's "naked history" is a "triumph" especially over Miranda, the woman who owns the island home that Skipper, his daughter Cassandra, and his granddaughter (possibly also daughter) Pixie share with her for a while. In contrast to the wandering island from which the scarcely-clothed Skipper writes his memoir, Miranda's island is cold, dark, and located off the New England coast; it is also the setting for Cassandra's eventual suicide. And, at least according to the story Skipper tells, Miranda, a woman whose brash

sexuality is both alluring and sinister, hastens Cassandra's throwing of herself from a lighthouse onto the black rocks below by enabling various trysts with a cast of shady local fishermen. Miranda does this not only by encouraging Cassandra's efforts to gain attention from men other than her father, but by actively thwarting the Skipper's bumbling, unassertive and ultimately futile efforts to "protect" his daughter. Thus, by the end of their time on the dark island, despite the Skipper's self-professed bravery as a "man of courage" and love for (or lover of?) his daughter, the reader senses that Miranda's ruthless mocking of Skipper's sexual impotence is also symbolic of his failure to save his daughter from killing herself.

In perhaps the most grotesque scene of the novel, soon after Cassandra's suicide and just before Skipper finally abandons Miranda's fixed island in favor of Catalina Kate's wandering island, Miranda gives Skipper a jar wrapped in white tissue paper and red, white and blue ribbons. Miranda gestures to the present on the kitchen table labeled "For Skip" and tauntingly says, "That one's got your name on it, Skip" (201). Shockingly to both the narrator and readers, the jar contains Cassandra's two-month old fetus. But before Skipper actually unwraps his present, Miranda reveals its contents. Naturally, he is incredulous. Yet finally, exasperated with his disbelief, Miranda says again, "I mean it, Skip. And just as I said, it's got your name on it. And it's hers, […] Candy's, I tell you.

Why do you think she jumped, you old fool?" (203). In the end, Miranda's "gift" seems to solidify Skipper's resolve to get away from Miranda and her dark island, but before leaving for good, Skipper takes his "present" and buries it atop Cassandra's grave.

The "two months" of the fetus would clearly correspond to a previous scene in which the Skipper and Cassandra take a day trip sailing around the island with an older fisherman named Captain Red, and his two consorts, Bub and Jomo. Throughout the trip, the three men are portrayed as constantly conspiring against the Skipper, and at one point, between the first and second time Skipper gets slugged in the head with a tire iron, he offers a hazy, seasick recollection of watching helplessly as Captain Red and Cassandra (apparently willingly) have sex while the other two crew members look on. The chronology of the story would certainly suggest that Captain Red is the father of the two-month old fetus, and yet Miranda's repeated presentation of the "gift" seems to carry with it also an accusation. It may in fact be possible that fetus has Skipper's "name on it" because he is himself its father. Earlier statements where Skipper calls himself both the "grandfather and father" of Cassandra's first child, Pixie, or describes his own daughter in highly sexualized language ("my teenage bombshell") would support such a reading, especially since Miranda seems so intent on encouraging Cassandra's escapades with other men as a way of freeing

her from her father's overprotective, if Quixotic, vigilance. Significantly, just before the wretched boat scene, Skipper calls himself an "accomplice, father, friend, traveling companion, yes, old chaperon, but lover and destroyer too" (176). At very least, Miranda seems to be accusing the Skipper of being directly responsible for Cassandra's decision to take her own life. Thus again, the attentive reader becomes increasingly suspicious of the narrator's self-portrayal as an innocent victim who can always explain why he did not do more to prevent the traumatic events he describes.[9]

Nevertheless, as the novel comes to a close, from the vantage of his "wandering island" and awaiting the birth of Catalina Kate's child, Skipper is finally able to have his "small quiet victory over Miranda after all" and, strangely,

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[9] Surprisingly, critics have been somewhat reluctant to acknowledge or confirm the indications of incest. However, in a 1971 interview Hawkes himself offers further grist for such a reading, though one might still be compelled to question not just Skipper's perspective but also Hawkes' understanding of this episode as essentially comic: "The scene on the little boat when Skipper sees Captain Red taking his daughter, Cassandra, is highly farcical and there comedy points up the extent of the poignancy of Skipper's reaction to seeing his own daughter in a sexual experience which he himself actually would have wanted to participate in. He's very possessive of his daughter. [… His courting her throughout the novel is] one of his liabilities. The extent to which he is unaware of his powerful relationship to his daughter is one way we could think of Skipper as an imperceptive narrator. But the comedy in that particular scene also dramatizes Skipper's perseverance. He not only has to suffer watching his daughter, but he's hit on the head by a tire iron. The comedy is used to dramatize both his determination and his ineffectualness and to make us compassionate to this maimed hero" (Kuehl 174). An earlier comment in the same interview is similarly revealing: "I hadn't thought much about incest. If the subject came up in an audience, I would no doubt argue for incest out of perversity, but, mind you, surface perversity in me always has at its root much deeper, serious concerns for human emotions. But incest doesn't mean as much to me as it did, say, to Faulkner" (Kuehl 172).

> over Cassandra too, since there are always faces, strange or familiar, young or old, waiting to kiss me in the dark, and since now there is one more little dark brown face that will soon be waiting like the others. My shades, my children, my memories, my time of no time, and I thank God for wandering islands and invisible shores. (205)

In this final chapter, suggestively titled "The Golden Fleas," the narrator concludes his "naked history" by telling of Catalina Kate's baby birth on All Saints Day and how their small family, Skipper, Sonny, Kate and the baby, celebrate by going to the cemetery that night. Though the narrator (and the author, as we shall see) clearly intends to convey a kind of hopefulness, the scene is also a bit absurd. As they make their way through the cemetery, Skipper suggests to Sonny that one of the candle-topped graves looks like a birthday cake. Then he tells his readers, "'Now, Catalina Kate,' I said quietly, 'the choice is yours. Do you think you can pick us out a nice grave?'" (208). She chooses an untended grave that has "No name. No dates" and they enjoy a midnight picnic which is clearly suggestive of a kind of phallic eucharist: "So the three of us and the baby sat at the foot of the old dazzling grave, and Catalina Kate tore into the bread and cut the blood sausage into edible lengths while I broke open the French wine. Thick bread. Black blood sausage. White wine" (209). And while they sit there, Skipper asks Kate who the baby looks like, "Sonny or me?" but her reply is evasive and cryptic, "Yes, sir. Him look like the fella in the grave" (209). Unflappable in his wandering island state of mind, Skipper merely says, "Of

course, Kate, […] But just think of it. We can start you off on another little baby in a few weeks. Would you like that, Kate? But of course you would" (209). Having now seen the birth of a child and filled with the hope of starting over "in a few weeks," the novel draws to a close with Skipper watching the "final flourish of my own hand," in an incantatory reverie: "Because now I am fifty-nine years old and I knew I would be, and now there is the sun in the evening, the moon at dawn, the still voice. That's it. The sun in the evening. The moon at dawn. The still voice" (210).

As the last words of the novel drift off, one realizes that the last "little dark brown face," Catalina Kate's baby, is never given a name. He remains only a face, and at that, one resembling the unknown, unseen "fella in the grave." Surely this is not an insignificant detail for a novel which begins so earnestly "naming" the characters of stories yet to be told and is clearly concerned with both the loss and generation of life—especially since the narrator's writing of the memoir corresponds precisely with Catalina Kate's pregnancy.[10] Earlier in the novel, during the chapter in which he first describes his "wandering island" and introduces himself as the "Artificial Inseminator," the narrator has predicted and

[10] In an essay comparing his own novel to John Barth's *On The Floating Opera*, Hawkes says clearly, "Skipper's narrative—the journal of his "naked history" as he calls it—is written in the specific nine-month period of Catalina Kate's pregnancy, begins shortly after the conception of the child and ends with its birth." ("*The Floating Opera* and *Second Skin*" 23).

anticipated this coalescence between the conclusion of his memoir and the birth of Kate's baby:

> So in six months and on the Night of All Saints Catalina Kate will bear her child—our child—and I shall complete my history, my evocation through a golden glass, my hymn to the invisible serpents of the wind, complete this the confession of my triumph, this my diary of an artificial inseminator. At the very moment Catalina Kate comes due my crabbed handwriting shall explode into a concluding flourish, and I will be satisfied. I will be fifty-nine years old and father to innumerable bright living dreams and vanquished memories. (49)

The narrator's linking of the completion of his story and the birth of a child is so explicit and his "prophesy" so certain, that a reader might wonder whether Catalina Kate's baby is, in terms of the literal "plot" of the novel, merely a symbol for the narrator's creative endeavor. Ultimately, especially in light of Skipper's unsuccessfully repressed feelings towards his daughter and his consistent self-portrayal as a courageous victim, a reader will also be moved to ask to what degree the Skipper's "naked history" is entirely a "fiction" of his own imagination. But, as Anthony Santore suggests, the question remaining at the end "is whether the price—self-deception—is not too much to pay for the artificiality of not only the insemination of both the cows and Kate, but of the

artificiality of his newfound peace of mind based on this deception—this second skin" (93).[11]

Obviously, Hawkes' decision to tell a story through the eyes of a narrator he sometimes describes as "morally reprehensible," is an attempt to complicate the distinction between "fiction," "reality," and "history" for his readers.[12] But the point it seems, is that by the end of *Second Skin*, for both the Skipper and Hawkes, the fictions we are capable of imagining are ultimately what matter most. They are a way of surviving the tragedy and violence of our existence, and it does not much matter whether or not the stories adequately reflect that existence so long as at the end of the telling, the storyteller lives on. As Hawkes himself says, "Skipper is talking, reconstructing his past life, not for the sake of ostensible understanding but in order to keep himself alive, is compulsively attempting to talk himself literally into continued existence, and this emerges as

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[11] Ignoring the social dimension of Hawkes' fiction and his stated intentions for what he hopes to provoke in his readers, Greiner concludes his own chapter on *Second Skin* arguing for, with the little success, the opposite view: "Language has been the key to [Skipper's] triumph all along. […] Such conscious style distances the reader from the narrative voice, for one is always aware that one is not participating in a life but reading a fiction. Hawkes desires this response, of course, for it illustrates his insistence on the primacy of the imagination, of creativity, of art. […] Skipper's narrative reliability is finally unimportant in *Second Skin*, the most lyrical, humorous, and affirmative novel in the Hawkes canon" (*Understanding John Hawkes* 103).

[12] Comparing his work to Andre Gide's *The Immoralist*, "a perfect work of art," Hawkes explains, that his own narrator is also "culpable" and "does not understand the story he is telling. I, too, wanted to create a novel that would allow for the dramatic interplay between what a narrator perceives and what the reader perceives" (Imhoff 61).

an historionic [sic] sensibility" ("*The Floating Opera*..." 20). Thus, in a very significant way, for the Skipper the fiction *is* in fact "reality." Stephen Nichols explains it this way:

> Skipper knows that true adversity lies not in physical suffering, but in the mental anguish, the anxiety which accompanies the threatened annihilation of self-identity: the will to believe that one is at least in part the person one believes oneself to be. Since he cannot meet force with force, the traditional recourse of the epic hero, Skipper meets this threat in the most effective way he can: by turning to the word that controls the action. In the Homeric sense, he becomes not a doer of deeds, but a sayer of words, the author of his naked history. (81)

Thus, it is precisely as author, as "sayer of words," that Skipper is able to fight back against the threat of annihilation, to, as it were, "meet force with [the] force" of his own imaginative re-assertion of his self.

In this sense, Skipper is only one of a long line of character-narrators whose self-justifying tales reveal their own propensity rejecting the "reality" of their situations.[13] What the critics and Hawkes' own comments make clear, however, is that in a novel which revolves around complicity in suicide and the concealing or disclosing of sexual violation, the narrator himself becomes a

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[13] To take just one example, Skipper's narrative immediately calls to mind the narrator of Nabokov's *Lolita*. Many others could be given, but it is interesting to note that the Skipper's tale and Hawkes' commentary bear more than a passing resemblance to Rousseau, whose own *Confessions* both entirely upends the function of the genre by ridiculing it and in many ways serves as a model for confession-as-fiction examples like *Second Skin.* Cf. Hawkes' comments below with his comments in his *Reveries* about what provoked an occasion of great joy and reverie: "nothing exterior to the self, nothing except the self and one's own existence. […] As long as this state lasts, one is sufficient to oneself, like God." (qtd. in Jeffrey 261–2).

portrait of Hawkes' ideal artist whose imaginative powers allows him to actually "create" rather than represent reality. Again, Nichols:

> Skipper becomes a symbol of the artist-as-mortal, and his story, a biography of the making of the artist in the tradition made familiar by Joyce's Stephen Dedalus or Proust's young Marcel, who experience a certain abortive existence believing themselves to be feckless, ineffective and slightly ridiculous, only to emerge, ultimately, in a new form as authoritative and powerful master of their own and other's destiny. [sic] (81)

Indeed, one of the most often quoted lines from Hawkes occurs at the end of an interview with John Graham where he, sounding a good deal like William Blake, says, "I want to try to create a world, not represent it. And of course I believe that the creation ought to be more significant than the representation" (31). Elsewhere Hawkes says again, "The ultimate power of the imagination is to create anything and everything—out of nothing" (qtd. in Marx 27). And yet, this is precisely how he describes the Skipper:

> In *Second Skin* I was trying to make Skipper a god-like figure, an androgynous figure. I had a vague notion that throughout mythology the gods have been bisexual or multi-sexual so I thought of a man who, on a literal level, would be male, female, impotent. I meant him by the end of the fiction to be a very powerful, all-fulfilled, all-fulfilling, totally self-sufficient human being. He, to me, in all his weakness is supposed to embody the strength of knowing that there is nothing else in the world except what he creates and the figures he discovers in his creation. (qtd. in Yarborough 74)

Furthermore, Hawkes' own description of himself as an artist "working with psychic substance or cerebral derangement in [an] effort to arrive at

'aesthetic bliss'" ("*The Floating Opera*…" 20) seems as apt as any for the "naked history" Skipper offers. Indeed, Hawkes readily admits that *Second Skin* is "concerned with derangement, unreality and the pain of sexual experiences. [It is] about the imagination and about the writing of novels." ("*The Floating Opera*…" 21). Patrick O'Donnell agrees:

> Skipper, then, sensitive, imaginative, and hyperbolic, is Hawkes's portrait of the artist—a partial portrait since it is case in the afterglow of Skipper's questionable paradise. Like the artist, Skipper's imagination and memory screen out, deny, affirm, expand, and define various experiences, transforming them and forcing them to align themselves with the aesthetic unity of the wandering island. (98)[14]

And yet, though Hawkes and his critics seem reluctant to do so, if Skipper's narrative is thus so clearly symbolic of novel writing and Skipper himself is indicative of Hawkes' successful artist, as readers of the novel we must ask whether there is a real link between the violence and violations that occur

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[14] Furthermore, though Hawkes (for obvious reasons) often insists that his stories are not be to be read autobiographically, his own essay "Notes on Writing a Novel," explains in great detail the similarities between *Second Skin* and his own circumstances as he wrote it: "My novel *Second Skin* was written in eight swift magnificent months in 1962-63, when my wife and children and I were living in the natural lushness and clarity of an island in the Caribbean. […] So for me *Second Skin* lends itself in special ways to the discussion of the fiction process. […] As I say, this novel is certainly not autobiographical. I myself have only seen the banal process of artificial insemination. […] And yet the two islands in *Second Skin* share obvious similarities with two quite real islands, while many images and the deepest thematic preoccupations of this novel do have their shadowy counterparts in memory" (qtd. in Trachtenberg 74–5). In a separate essay, Hawkes reinforces this point: "I might say here that *Second Skin* was written very much as Skipper writes his "naked history"—without a firm plan in mind and on the ruled pages of tables meant for the exercises of school children" ("*The Floating Opera* and *Second Skin*" 24).

within the story and Hawkes' unapologetic aesthetic pronouncement "that there is nothing else in the world except what [the artist] creates and the figures he discovers in his creation." Hawkes clearly believes that the novel's ending—Skipper's "wandering island" and his ability to "triumph" over his past by siring both child and novel—ultimately signifies a "grudging or sardonic or tenuous or hard-won affirmation of life" ("*The Floating Opera* …" 21). He also insists that his "writing is not mere indulgence in violence or derangement, is hardly intended simply to shock," and that the comic element of his novels ultimately "create sympathy, compassion."[15] The comedy can even be

> a means for judging human failings as severely as possible; it's a way of exposing evil (one of the pure words I mean to preserve) and of persuading the reader that even he may not be exempt from evil; and of course comic distortion tells us that anything is possible and hence expands the limits of our imaginations. (Graham 27)

In this regard, Hawkes' explanation actually corresponds quite closely to Flannery O'Connor's comments regarding the revelatory possibility of comedy and the recognition of evil. And yet, for the sake of the Cassandra's of this world and in order to offer a coherent account of a Christian aesthetic which does not

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[15] Along these lines, Donald Greiner insists that Hawkes' fiction is "highly moral." Hawkes' novels "deny the reader the usual props so as to surprise him with antithetical subjects. But the reader's experience is also paradoxical, for as he is shaken, he is simultaneously soothed by a new awareness. Thus for Hawkes the writing is moral in a duel sense: in its use of antithetical universalities such as birth and death, and in its ability to provoke paradoxical responses which jolt our complacent attitudes toward these subjects" (*Comic Terror* 13).

assume violence (linguistic or otherwise) is inevitable and necessary, we must acknowledge some crucial differences. For Hawkes, it seems the only way as an artist to "create sympathy" and "expose evil" is to come as close as possible to, even become, evil:

> If the point is to discover true compassion, true sympathy, then clearly the task is to sympathize with what we ordinarily take to be truly repulsive in life—hence identification with the so-called criminal or rebellious mentality. I think of the act of writing as an act of rebellion because it is so single and it dares to presume to create the world. I enjoy a sense of violation, a criminal resistance to safety, to the security provided by laws or systems. I'm trying to find the essential human experiences when we are unhinged or alienated from familiar, secure life. (Kuehl 162)

For Hawkes, finding the "essential human experience" requires rejecting anything which could make a claim on him—state and church institutions, established poetic forms and interpretive categories, symbols—especially when these prescribe limits to sexual "expression":

> I think that religion does indeed depend on repression, on the lawful arranging of one's life, and also offers consolations that let us off the hook. I do not believe in any kind of god or any kind of afterlife obviously. It seems to me necessary to live by creating our own contexts within the constant knowledge of the imminence of annihilation. (Kuehl 160)

And so, as artist, Hawkes admits that he wants to "destroy conventional morality and conventional attitudes. That's part of [my fiction's] purpose—to challenge us in every way possible in order to cause us to know ourselves better and to live with more compassion" (Kuehl 157). For Hawkes, what keeps us from living

with “compassion” are those things which exist prior to the unfettering of the individual consciousness. Thus, he admits,

> [Christian symbolism] is the kind of ritualizing or symbolizing that I’m trying to escape. […] Yes, trying to destroy. In *Second Skin* Skipper gives away the golden cross. He doesn’t need the cross anymore. He is his own god. He becomes god, which expresses my attitude as well. We ourselves are the source of everything, the indignities as well as the potentials for beauty, serenity, grace, and so on.” (Kuehl 161)

Clearly Hawkes maintains the possibility that we can act in undignified ways, but what many critics who approvingly quote Hawkes’ supposed compassion-driven violence and completely “free” imagination fail to recognize, is that on such an account of “sympathy,” the only “human failings” he actually could be permitted to judge are those who, like O’Connor, do not presume to be the authors of their own existence.[16] Under this rubric, the only kind of “violence” Hawkes could legitimately recognize would be to suggest that one’s self is *not* ultimately the source of “beauty, serenity, grace, and so on.” But the “violence” of writing a novel would remain indistinguishable from the violence of incest.

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[16] S. K. Oberbeck’s explanation of Hawkes’ “demonic sympathy” is representative of a common response which argues that both Skipper’s and Hawkes’ violence is finally a good: “All characters bask in its cruelty, all events are tinged by its love, for to understand everything is to ridicule everything—or to sympathize with everything. In this posture is a curious banality, and many of Hawkes’ readers find it difficult to separate sympathy from ridicule in his fiction. They are much the same. […] The novelist too must be able to satisfy his frustrations violently” (46).

Shockingly, critics seem entirely untroubled by the ethical implications of Hawkes' comment. For example, like Hawkes, Donald Greiner suggests that Skipper, now removed from his troubled past can be the source of everything: "he is free to construct his own myths by narrating his history in any way he chooses. One of the ways he chooses to exercise this artistic freedom is in his role as the namer in his novel" (*Comic Terror* 187). For Greiner, however, Skipper's appropriation of classical Greek names and Shakespearean characters, "does not seem a deliberate attempt to mislead us as much as an in illustration of Skipper's need to write his own story from his own private point of view" (*Comic Terror* 188). But if, as Hawkes says, Donne was wrong and we are in fact "all islands—inaccessible, drifting apart, thirsting to be explored, magical" (qtd. in Trachtenberg, 76), then what separates the "reality" the artist creates from that of the rapist or the father who commits incest? Hawkes may in fact write to "expose evil," but if we like the Skipper and Hawkes' artist are own gods, what is to keep us from creating through our own words a world in which we are entitled to name or not name people and things according to our own immediate pleasures?

Hawkes himself says that "For Skipper there is no logic, except the 'logic' of violent coincidence and purely sensuous association" ("The *Floating Opera*…" 22). And yet, as we have seen, Skipper—whose own story corresponds to the

sexual ambiguity leading to the birth of Catalina Kate's baby and who wonders whether he could have prevented his daughter's suicide by saying more—also embodies many of the qualities of Hawkes' ideal artist. On this point, Leslie Marx admits that Hawkes' "conception of the artist may suggest works of art that are merely beautiful (and hurtful) but irrelevant icons to a solipsistic imagination, divorced from engagement with, or intentionality toward, the world." And yet, her own explanation that Hawkes is aware "of the need to accommodate 'brute reality'" only underscores the inherent violence of his aesthetic: "It is out of the tension between his authority and the *molesting* of the world that the power of his art derives. He argues that where living itself is an act of imagination, so fiction is an exploration of living" (28 emphasis mine). In light of this, Lucy Frost's final assessment is terrifying:

> Only as art does the imaginary island out of space and time join the world of space and time and become "true," in Melville's sense. Hawkes establishes a comic association between the AI [Skipper's abbreviation for Artificial Inseminator] and a novelist by having Skipper write a book when not busy impregnating Kate or cows, and when not constructing rituals. By means of the novelist's wonderfully inventive—his fertile—imagination, the reader receives the seeds of life through the artificial method that is art. If the AI is successful, the reader will become the impregnated cow. (61)[17]

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[17] Leslie Marx's assessment is a bit more to the point: "*Second Skin* confronts the possibility of, and the obstructions to, beginnings, both textual and sexual. Skipper wants to inseminate with a pen as well as with a penis and pipette" (50).

And finally, if Frederick Busch is right to suggest that in becoming the Artificial Inseminator, the Skipper "has redeemed his oppression [at the hands of his sodomizers] in a world of violence by imitating the stance of that violence in an act of giving and creation" (117), then the implication for Hawkes' aesthetic and his readers is that giving, creating, indeed any form of speech-act, is a kind of sodomy reenacted. For Hawkes, this is simply the way things are, and the only way of coping in the face of absurdity is to prop one's own self up by one's own manufactured, artificial "reality." In this context, compassion and sympathy can mean nothing more than self-preservation and self-promotion, or at best self-appeasement. For what one gives life to must ultimately be nameless if one cannot suffer the risk of a genuine encounter with existence, with the demands, responsibilities, and limitations that being places on one's ability to "embody the strength of knowing that there is nothing else in the world except what he creates and the figures he discovers in his creation."

Furthermore, as I have been suggesting, such a statement about aesthetic "creation" is also always inextricably a statement about *interpretation*. Indeed, Hawkes' ideal artist begins and ends with the epistemological and hermeneutical assumptions akin to O'Connor's Hoover Shoats: "You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it"(*CW* 86). For O'Connor, however, the artist

creates (and the reader reads) only in so far that she "accurately" interprets reality according to what David Hart calls the "objective" beauty of being: its tireless granting of distance, evocation of true desire, crossing of boundaries, guarding against Gnosticism, and resistance to the merely "symbolic." As we shall see in the section that follows, unlike Hawkes' abiding contention that the artist's posture demands "coldness, detachment,"(26)[18] O'Connor's artist and interpreter receives and takes genuine pleasure in the self and the other as gifts—not as one whose *différance* must be traversed or overcome through some elaborate, esoteric language game, but as one who is both the consequence and reflection of beauty's ceaseless "handing over and return of the riches of being" (Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite* 18).

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[18] Ironically, in their introduction to one of the earliest works to explore the significance of names and naming in O'Connor's "Parker's Back," Driskell and Britain suggest that the following quote from Hawkes quote regarding the "constant in avant-garde writing" offers a great deal of insight into O'Connor's work: "This constant is a quality of coldness, detachment, ruthless determination to face up to the enormities of ugliness and potential failure within ourselves and in the world around us and to bring to this exposure a savage or saving comic spirit and the saving beauties of language." While O'Connor no doubt believed fiction could expose our own failures, she would never agree with Hawkes's Arnoldian assumption that the "beauties of language" in itself could save us. Driskell and Britain's failure to adequately distinguish between their two aesthetics, however, is only further emphasized by their own immediate quotation of O'Connor's crucial introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann*: "If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetical unsentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in force-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber" (*CW* 830–1). As we shall explore further below, O'Connor's introduction offers a critical indictment of the true terror that results when words, even the beautiful ones, are "cut off" from the Word.

"Parker's Back:" Art, Naming Accurately, and Iconic Beauty

Somewhat surprisingly, O'Connor was nearly always an unabashed admirer of Hawkes' work.[19] When first editions of Hawkes's *The Lime Twig* came

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[19] Unlike the genuine friendship and mutual respect that O'Connor and John Hawkes appear to have had for each other, subsequent O'Connor criticism has often been deeply polarized between those who agree with Hawkes' now famous Blakean "compliment" that O'Connor, "was on the Devil's side," and those who, like O'Connor, vehemently disagree. Critics from both sides of the aisle might be surprised, therefore, to discover that Hawkes' seminal essay in O'Connor studies (published in the Summer issue of 1962 in the *Sewanee Review*) came about only after a series of exchanges with O'Connor in which she, without ever condoning his thesis, repeatedly encourages him to publish his essay. In April of 1962, presumably after reviewing a draft of Hawkes's essay, O'Connor sent Hawkes (whom she often calls "Jack") a letter saying, "I like the piece very very much and I hope Andrew [Lytle, *Sewanee's* editor,] takes it or if not him somebody else" (*HOB* 470). O'Connor immediately clarifies that her encouragement, however, does not imply an endorsement of his claims: "This is not to say that you have convinced me at all that what you say is perverse is perverse. But you are very fine in pointing out where I disagree with you so I don't feel this does any damage to my views and the quality of the just plain textual insights is so wonderful that of course I hope this will be read" (*HOB* 470). That O'Connor genuinely desired its publication is only further corroborated when she apologizes later on for her "sloppy and hasty letter, but I want to send it right away because you seem to be in some doubt over the piece and I don't think you ought to be" (*HOB* 471).

Though the crucial distinctions O'Connor articulates elsewhere in the letter between her and Hawkes' view of the "perverse" are critical for the argument I develop in this chapter, what is so striking here—at least for readers familiar with the critical conversation regarding O'Connor—is that not only does O'Connor go out of her way to encourage Hawkes to publish a work she clearly disagrees with, she appears to be more confident of the value of Hawkes' critical contribution than even Hawkes is. But even though her comments might appear to lend support for critics seeking to further Hawkes's thesis (though they might just as equally emphasize Hawkes's own uncertainty about publishing his claim), what they actually reveal about her, given her consistent refutation of Hawkes's provocative claim, is her remarkable capacity to be both confident about what she was hoping to accomplish and genuinely (or generously) receptive to critical insight, regardless of its source. Rather than suggesting that O'Connor agreed with Hawkes's view of evil, or worse, that their differences on the subject were insignificant, O'Connor's somewhat surprising reaction to a clearly contradictory and consequence-laden thesis affirms instead the truth of her sense that a Catholics need not be afraid to take long looks at things: "The Catholic fiction writer is entirely free to observe. […] He feels perfectly free to look at the [universe] we already have and to show exactly what he sees" (*MM* 178).

out in 1961, the back cover highlighted a ringing endorsement from O'Connor. The quote was drawn from a 1960 letter O'Connor sent to Hawkes, in which she says,

> You suffer [*The Lime Twig*] like a dream. It seems to be something that is happening to you, that you want to escape from but can't. It's quite remarkable.[…] I want to read it again in a month or so and see if the second time I can take it as a observer and not victim. Meanwhile my admiration is 90% awe and wonder. (*HOB* 412)

Several years after reading the *Lime Twig*, O'Connor praises Hawkes' *Second Skin* in another letter: "I think this one has an added power to keep the reader right there with it and I had the thought that you're about 90% magician. […] My appreciation is all on the level of what you make me see in a literal visual way. I don't know any other writer who can do it…" (*HOB* 553).

However, despite her admiration and her consistent encouragement of Hawkes' writing, O'Connor's letters usually also reveal some uncertainty about what to say, and she generally confines any aesthetic judgments to the criterion of whether the work can hold the reader's attention. In an earlier letter to Betty Hester O'Connor is much more candid and admits plainly, "It's [*Second Skin*] a little easier to follow than the others but when it's over you don't know any more what you've got. At least I don't" (*HOB* 552). And in a subsequent letter to Hester, she says again, "I just pure didn't know what to say about it myself" (*HOB* 563).

But given the clear similarities between *Second Skin* and "Parker's Back," perhaps it is not too much of a stretch to suggest that writing a short story was in fact O'Connor's way of saying something. Indeed, though the record in O'Connor's letters suggests she had started working on a version of "Parker's Back" in 1961, she never seems to have made much progress on it until 1964—a few months after she had read the galleys for John Hawkes' novel *Second Skin* and a few weeks before her death. Much like Hawkes' *Second Skin,* a central part of O'Connor's narrative revolves around the protagonist receiving a tattoo. And as with *Second Skin*, "Parker's Back" also invokes the significance of names and naming, though clearly there are important differences for the role they play in her story and what these suggest about the nature of artistic creation and reception.

Like Skipper, O.E. Parker has begrudgingly let himself be tattooed with another person's name. In order to feed his ink addiction, Parker has agreed to have his mother's name tattooed on his chest, because "she would not pay for any tattoo except her name on a heart, which he had put on, grumbling" (*CW* 658). Parker's tattoo is no less ridiculous than Skipper's, though, by comparison, it is much easier to laugh about. And like Skipper, Parker is remarkably capable of spinning things in his favor: "However, her name was Betty Jean and nobody had to know it was his mother" (*CW* 658).

Indeed, for most of his life, O.E. Parker assumes nobody has to know about his *own* name. Until he meets Sara Ruth Cates, Parker "had never revealed the name to any man or woman, only to the files of the navy and the government, and it was on his baptismal record which he got at the age of a month" (*CW* 662). But Sara Ruth, much like the tattoos, exerts an inexplicable, compelling force over Parker and finally gets him to whisper his secret:

> "What's your name?" she asked.
> "O. E. Parker," he said.
> "What does O.E. stand for?"
> "You can just call me O.E.," Parker said. "Or Parker. Don't nobody call me by name."
> "What's it stand for?" she persisted.
> "Never mind," Parker said. "What's yours?"
> "I'll tell you when you tell me what them letters are the short of," she said.
> "You'll go blab it around," he said.
> "I'll swear I'll never tell nobody," she said. "On God's holy word I swear it." (*CW* 662)

Parker is unable to either change the subject or dissuade Sara Ruth, and eventually, he leans over and whispers his name into her ear. Perhaps savoring more than just the mere sound of his name, Sara Ruth then whispers to herself: "'Obadiah' […] Her face slowly brightened as if the name came as a sign to her. 'Obadiah,' she said again. […] 'Obadiah Elihue,' she said in a reverent voice." Sara Ruth repeats his name three times, each time saying it louder until finally she speaks his full name. However, her reverie, perhaps not unlike the reader's, is soon broken by Parker (for whom the name "still stank") being Parker: "If you

call me that aloud, I'll bust your head open." (*CW* 662). Indeed, in the story, Sara Ruth is the first to speak aloud Parker's name though he has not yet come to understand what he or his name "stands for." But as O'Connor's readers know well, Parker will not find any rest until he has himself spoken it; for, like the biblical prophet after whom he is named, to reject being called by his name, is to reject his *calling* as "the servant" or "worshipper of Yahweh."[20] In more ways than one, Parker's story might be succinctly summarized as a reversal of his assumption that, "don't no-body call me by name."

Towards the end of story, having been away from for a few days and having received a barefoot revelation in front of a burning tree like the Old Testament Moses, Parker finds himself locked out of his own home. As he bangs on the front door demanding to be admitted, Parker repeatedly replies "O.E." to Sara Ruth's relentless and unsatisfied question, "Who's there?" Eventually, Sara Ruth again prevails, and Parker leans down once more to whisper his name, this time through the key hole. And as he does, the narrator says that Parker "felt the light pouring through, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (*CW* 673). Thanks to Sara Ruth's misguided, though effectual goading, after hearing of Parker's lifelong and often

[20] For further discussions of the biblical significance of the names, see Driskell and Britain (115–123) and Cofer (30–36).

self-deluded search for meaning, the readers, along with Parker himself, finally get to see and hear "who *is* there." Such a revelation, I argue in what follows, not only cannot be a result of genuine violence, but ultimately prohibits us, as Hawkes and his critics do, from making a fundamental distinction between aesthetic and ontological beauty.

Indeed, those who accuse O'Connor of violating her own art (and thereby her readers) by offering such an explicitly "religious" theme, do not sufficiently acknowledge how O'Connor, as artist, has prepared her readers for this culminating moment. The mention of the "perfect arabesque of colors" harkens back to an earlier point in the story where Parker, as a 14-year old, encounters a tattooed man at the fair. Except for his loins girdled in animal skins,[21] the man is covered "from head to foot" in ink so that when he flexes his muscles, "the arabesque of men and beasts and flowers on his skin appeared to have a subtle motion of its own" (*CW* 657). Up until then, Parker, who was "as ordinary as a loaf of bread, […] had never before felt the least motion of wonder in himself,"

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[21] As we shall continue to see, "Parker's Back" is riddled with allusions to the account in Genesis of Adam and Eve in the garden. At their first meeting, in a reversal of the Garden of Eden, Parker offers Sara Ruth an apple in hopes of getting her attention (*CW* 660). Significantly, when Sara Ruth first notices the tattoos on his arms, she immediately drops his hand "as if she accidentally grasped a poisonous snake" (*CW* 657). Here, the tattooed man is clothed in the same way as Adam and Eve when they are expelled from the garden (Gen. 3:21). Such references are significant for the case I make here between the origins and implications of the differences between Hawkes' and O'Connor's view on "naming" and the nature of human creativity.

nor did it ever "enter his head that there was anything out of the ordinary about the fact that he existed." For Parker, this realization is subtle but life-altering: "It was as if a blind boy had been turned so gently in a different direction that he did not know his destination had been changed" (*CW* 658).

At first, however, Parker's response to his new ontological awareness only results in an obsession with getting more and more tattoos, even as his "dissatisfaction" increases with each one (*CW* 659). Ralph Wood notes that Parker becomes especially obsessed "with the power that his tattoos give him, especially the power to dominate women," and chooses "images of predatory violence—a tiger, a panther, a cobra, and hawks on both thighs" (*Flannery O'Connor* 44). However, unlike the man's body at the fair, "the effect was not one of intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched" (*CW* 659). Parker, it seems, is still in search of something which has a "subtle motion of its own."

Indeed, Parker's many pursuits in the story, including that of Sara Ruth, are themselves haphazard and nearly always botched. And it isn't until after he receives the tattoo of the Byzantine Christ and gets kicked out of a bar room like the prophet Jonah being tossed overboard, that Parker is finally willing to take a long look at himself. Having had his destination altered, his "blindness" begins to dissipate. While "examining his soul" as he sits in the alley outside the bar,

Parker finally recognizes "it [his soul] as a spider web of facts and lies that was not at all important to him but which appeared to be necessary in spite of his opinion" (*CW* 672). This moment also prepares the readers for the eventual transformation of Parker's "spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors" (*CW* 673). And it is here that he first realizes that "The eyes that were now forever on his back were eyes to be obeyed. He was as certain of it as he had ever been of anything" (*CW* 672).

Significantly, this certainty to obey "in spite of his opinion" reminds him of that rapturous moment at the fair, the time when he escaped church to join the navy, and the moment when, begrudgingly, he agreed to marry Sara Ruth. For all his women-chasing and tattoo-seeking, Parker is in fact the one being pursued. And though he cannot fully articulate it, Parker intuits that cultivating true vision will necessarily exert some kind of influence over him. As he looks out across "a vast vista of hills and one small mountain" the narrator explains, "Long views depressed Parker. You look out into space like that and you begin to feel as if someone were after you, the navy or the government or religion" (*CW* 661). But when we as readers come to that culminating moment in the story when Parker whispers his name and finds himself being filled with light and his soul being turned into "a garden of trees and birds and beasts," we know that he has at last come home. No longer "something botched and haphazard," Parker

is finally at home in his body *and* soul. The two have become one as he submits in the freedom of obedience to the eyes on his back which have been looking at and through him all along. [22]

Unlike the first Adam but in response to the image of the second Adam which he bears on his back, Parker returns to his original home, the "garden of trees and birds and beasts," and has acknowledged his own naming according to the light which has seen through him. In that sense, Obadiah Elihue—"God's servant" and "my God is he"—now seeks, quite literally, to bring the light to Sara Ruth. But even though she is instrumental in Parker's realization of the extraordinary-ordinariness of his existence, Sara Ruth is blinded by her own Gnostic, iconoclastic piety. As Parker rushes to light the lamp, Sara Ruth scolds him: "What's the matter with you, wasting that keresene this near daylight? […] I aint got to look at you" (*CW* 674). Despite the role she has twice played in prompting Parker to speak his name, Sara Ruth has always refused to really

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[22] Perhaps because he has himself "become dissatisfied with both the piety of traditional readings of O'Connor and the attempt to recuperate her work for a politically correct (and pedestrian) secular humanism" (421), Thomas Haddox reaches quite the opposite, and I think, untenable, conclusion: "The 'perfect arabesque' that Parker sought as a visual spectacle on his body has been achieved at last, but only because it has become invisible: the soul is now perfected, but the body remains as "haphazard and botched' as ever to the eye—and indeed becomes more so as Sara Ruth's broom raises welts on the face of Jesus" (421). Haddox, like Sara Ruth, cannot see that in so far that Parker has been given (and called by) his name, Parker's body *is* the face of God and is therefore in no way "haphazard" or "botched." Rather, as Sykes and others have shown, in the very welts he receives, Parker's body becomes an *imitatio Christ* and thereby participates in that *kenosis* which redeems the world from its violence against itself by the infinite gift of itself.

"see" him and here she refuses to recognize him as one who bears God's image. Earlier in the story, readers are told that "if she had had better sense," she "could have enjoyed a tattoo on his back." But she "would not even look at the ones he had elsewhere. When he attempted to point out especial details of them, she would shut her eyes tight and turn her back as well. Except in total darkness, she preferred Parker dressed and with his sleeves rolled down" (*CW* 663). For Sara Ruth, the images, like churches, (*CW* 663) are idolatrous, a "vanity of vanities," (*CW* 660) and merely "trash" that Parker puts on himself (*CW* 674).

But this time, having uttered his name, Parker will not be outdone. He turns his back toward her and cries:

> "Look at it! Don't just say that! *Look* at it!"
> "I done looked," she said.
> "Don't you know who it is?" he cried in anguish.
> "No, who is it?" Sara Ruth said. "It ain't anybody I know."

Indeed, the image of the stern Bizantine Christ isn't any "body" she knows, because for Sara Ruth, "God don't look like that! […] He's a spirit. No man shall see his face" (*CW* 674). Though she has heard Parker's declare himself "God's servant" and proclaim "God is he," she does not, indeed cannot, recognize the face of God in anything. But here, echoing Sara Ruth's own self-damning admission, Parker's voice is that of a damning prophet: "What do you know how he looks? […] You ain't seen him" (*CW* 674).

As various critics who have reached very different conclusions have noticed, in this case Parker's voice is also that of an artist. Such a reading is supported not only by O'Connor's comments elsewhere about the artist's responsibility to help her readers see, but also by the example of the artist within the story itself who literally inscribes images and words on people's bodies. As with Sara Ruth, earlier in the story Parker has himself been compelled to take a look at the tattoo on his back. After completing two days of work on Parker's back, the tattoo artist repeatedly tells Parker to take a look. Whereas previously Parker had "no desire for [a tattoo] anywhere he could not readily see it himself," (*CW* 659) this time Parker avoids making eye contact with embodied image at all costs. Parker is reluctant not simply because he thinks that by having to look into two mirrors he will "make an idiot of himself" (*CW* 663), but because he is still haunted by the eyes he had found near the front of the book where the supposedly *out*-of-date pictures are (*CW* 667). The picture portrays the "haloed head of a stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes" and these eyes have a kind of life of their own; they "glanced at him swiftly," and in their silence, "as if silence were a language itself," they say over and again, "GO BACK" (*CW* 667). Compared to these penetrative eyes under which he feels "as transparent as the wing of a fly," Sara Ruth's "sharp tongue and ice-pick" eyes seem "soft and dilatory" (*CW* 669).

But because he feels like he is going crazy and hopes to "return to doing things according to his own sound judgment," Parker is reluctant to engage the tattoo artist in much chit-chat, though he does rather foolishly brag that "A man can't save his self from whatever it is he don't deserve none of my sympathy" (*CW* 669). When the artist pushes him further about why he wants this particular tattoo, Parker decides "he had told the artist enough of his business. Artists were all right in their place but he didn't like them poking their noses into the affairs of regular people" (*CW* 670). But writing on the bodies of "regular,""ordinary" people *is* this artist's business, and when he has finally completed the piece, three times he has to tell Parker to take a look. On the last one, he takes Parker "roughly by the arm and propelled him between the two mirrors. 'Now *look,*' he said, angry at having his work ignored (*CW* 670).

Of the many critics who view this story as O'Connor's own *Portrait of the Artist*, André Bleikasten is characteristically unambiguous about O'Connor's artistic ferocity. In his various writings on O'Connor, Bleikasten often portrays O'Connor as an artist who, much like the God who "intrudes" into her stories, is herself angry at having her work ignored. In "Writing on the Flesh: Tattoos and Taboos in 'Parker's Back,'" Bleikasten quite reasonably suggests that Parker "should be seen, not only as one of O'Connor's preacher figures, but also as an artist figure, and probably even a as a comically distorted projection of the

writer" (17). Noting that "Writing, in the last resort, is perhaps little more than an elaborate and displace form of tattooing, a sublimation of the tattooed body into the *corpus*, tomb and temple of the written self," (17) he thus concludes that as a writer, O'Connor, in her own way

> added tattoo after tattoo, hoping that in the end they would cohere into a beautiful design . And where Parker, her ultimate fictional double, her brother in suffering, failed, she did indeed succeed. Her grotesques and arabesques have not paled. They are as fresh, as mysterious, and as compelling as ever, and insofar as the reader is *impressed*, he becomes in turn the writer's posthumous second skin. (18)

Beyond its curious, though surely coincidental, evocation of the title of Hawkes' novel, Bleikasten's conclusion is significant for our purposes here as it again affirms the analogical chain I have sought to establish between the author, her characters, and the reader's abilities (or inabilities) to perceive beauty. Like Sykes, Bleikasten is implicitly suggesting that genuine revelation of the beautiful must always be embodied or "*impressed*" into flesh, not simply in the concreteness of the story's character, but in the reader's experience of it as well.

And yet, on almost every other count, Bleikasten's assumptions seem antithetical to such a conclusion. For one, Bleikasten ultimately reads Parker's own journey as a failure. O'Connor closes her story with the striking image of the battered Parker: "There he was—who called himself Obadiah Elihue—

leaning against the tree, crying like a baby" (*CW* 675). For Bleikasten, however, "the story does not end in beautitude;" Parker is

> Reborn, perhaps, but rather than accession to a new and higher identity, the last glimpse we get of Parker evokes regression to the utter helplessness of the newborn child, and if we try to imagine his future, we can think of nothing but further confusion, further humiliation, further suffering, in a grotesque *imitatio Christi* most likely to end in another crucifixion. (16)

Unlike Sykes, however, for Bleikasten the *imitatio Christi* necessarily implies a "regression," and the roots of this disparity can be seen in the differences between their assumptions about "identity" as much as about the nature of "art."

Earlier in his essay, Bleikasten derides critical approaches which "endlessly [embroider] the pattern of interpretation which O'Connor wanted to impose on her audience" (9). Preferring a "freer, less timorous, and less pious approach" (10), Bleikasten suggests that Parker's conversion might be understood "less spiritually and more psychologically, as the beginning of an 'identity crisis,' a period of psychic disturbances taking Parker to the verge of madness" (11). While there can be no doubt that Parker undergoes an "identity crisis," what is perhaps most revealing about Bleikasten's approach is his assumption that "identity" can be understood apart from the spiritual. Such an assumption allows Bleikasten to suggest, for example, that by coaxing Parker into "owning his Christian name," Sara Ruth ultimately "brings him to acknowledge his identity as shaped by language and lineage" (13). Parker's

"identity" thus becomes, in the end, a sociological accident rather than another instantiation of the Trinity's ceaseless giving and returning of Being.

One implication of Bleikasten's approach, then, is that Sara Ruth can be seen not only as "a fiercely uncompromising representative" of the "radical otherness of the [Old Testament] Law" but also as one who fulfills the more "secular" function of "cur[ing]" Parker from his "extravagant fantasies and mak[ing] him conform to the accepted standards of a cultural order" (13). What is curious about Bliekasten's claim, however, is the ease with which he divides the secular "culture" from the sacredness of the O.T. law, suggesting all the while that the ethical, like one's identity, is ultimately derivative of "language and lineage." Much more dangerously, Bleikasten's notion of identity allows him to conclude that, "inscribed on Parker's skin, fixed on it almost like grafted organs, [the eyes of the Byzantine Christ] betoken the final dis-owning, the final ex-propriation of his body, the ultimate dispossession of his self through absolute surrender to the Law" (16).[23] For Bleikasten, it is clear, Parker's search for identity is a failure because it ends in surrender, suffering, and childlikeness, rather than self-assertion.

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[23] Such a conclusion seems perfectly consonant with Bleikasten's untenable assertion elsewhere that O'Connor's work, "is by no means a reaffirmation of the Christian mystery of the Incarnation. O'Connor's divisive vision perpetuates the idealistic cleavage between spirit and body, eternity and time, God and man, and Christ is likewise split into two irreconcilable halves" ("The Heresy…" 156).

But such a mistaken conclusion, I have been suggesting, stems from a misunderstanding of the rhetoric of both "the Law" and "Beauty." For even though Bleikasten rightly acknowledges the way icons "invert the relationship of seeing to seen" and should be understood not "as an object to be contemplated, but as a subject contemplating us," (15) he nonetheless assumes this reversal ultimately implies a "dispossession" of his self. Much like the early Parker who refuses to speak his name and to take "long looks" at anything for fear that something will come after him, for Bleikasten such a reversal from being the one contemplating to the one contemplated—what Hart refers to as the "suasive" rhetoric of beauty—necessarily implies violation, an "ex-propriation" even, of one's true identity. In a later essay, Bleikasten explains, "O'Connor's God is Christ the Tiger rather than Christ the Lamb, a God infinitely distant who confronts us with the agonizing mystery of absolute otherness and whose abrupt transcendence is manifested in sudden deflagrations of power" ("The Heresy…" 155). And so, he is forced to conclude that, "The truth of O'Connor's work is the truth of her art, not that of her church. […] Pitting the supernatural against the natural in fierce antagonism, her theology holds nothing but scorn for everything human" (156). Admitting that O'Connor's "fallen world, it is true, is visited by grace," he is nonetheless left to wonder: "but it is grace, as she evokes it in her

last stories, anything other than the vertigo of the *nada* and the encounter with death? And who is this God whose very mercy is terror?" (156–7).

As with many of the critics we have already encountered, Bleikasten is again right to question accounts which seek to justify the terror of a "merciful" violence. Within such an understanding of "grace," he would be quite right to suggest that O'Connor's truth is "not that of her church" and is scornful of "everything human." But the real question here is not whether O'Connor conforms to her church, but rather what O'Connor's church has to say about what beauty says and how it can be received. And crucial to engaging such a question, especially in relation to Hawkes's *Second Skin*, is the way O'Connor's theology shapes her understanding of the intrinsic creativity in the naming of things, in so far that such naming is a participation in beauty's ceaseless giving of itself to and reception of the being named rather than a violence imposed upon it.

Against the Derridean suggestion that "To name, to give names […] is the originary violence of language," (112), Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann makes abundantly clear how naming, within the proper text, is essentially creative and a participation in God's own self-giving:

> The significant fact about the life in the Garden is that man is to *name* things. As soon as animals have been created to keep Adam company, God brings them to Adam to see what he will call them. […] Now, in the Bible a name is infinitely more than a means to

> distinguish one thing from another. It reveals the very essence of a thing, or rather its essence as God's gift. To name a thing is to manifest the meaning and value God gave it, to know it as coming from God and to know its place and within the cosmos created by God. To name a thing, in other words, is to bless God for it and in it. (15)

Clearly, this same theology of creation as a proclamation of a gift rather than the violation of an other animates O'Connor's articulation of her aesthetic. In a series of epistolary exchanges with Betty Hester regarding the "moral basis of poetry," O'Connor explains,

> I suppose when I say that the moral basis of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God, I mean about the same thing that Conrad meant when he said that his aim as an artist was to render the highest possible justice to the visible universe. For me the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe. Somewhere St. Augustine says that the things of the world poured forth from God in a double way: intellectually into the minds of the angels and physically in the world of things. (*HOB* 128)

Whereas for Hawkes and his narrator Skipper, the "moral basis" of any fiction would be" the strength of knowing that there is nothing else in the world except what he creates and the figures he discovers in his creation" (qtd. in Yarborough 74), O'Connor's artist most truly fulfills her vocation in so far that she names "the things of God" accurately. Whereas for Hawkes "representation" is on a much lower order than "creation" ("I want to try to create a world, not represent it. And of course I believe that the creation ought to be more significant than the representation" (qtd. in Graham 31)) , for O'Connor, the only truly creative act is

one which does "justice to the visible universe" by acknowledging it as a "reflection of the invisible universe." And this difference, I have been suggesting, is precisely the difference between an aesthetic of beauty an aesthetic of violence.

Indeed, as David Hart so convincingly shows, it is Beauty's "objectivity" that frees both artist and audience from our own self-serving, self-preserving, and parasitic notions of beauty's persuasion. Only if Beauty "possesses a phenomenal priority, and indefectible precedence over whatever response it evokes," can it be received as a gift, rather than as something taken or appropriated. And unlike Bleikasten's characterization of a god whose "agonizing mystery of absolute otherness, […] abrupt transcendence," manifests itself in "sudden deflagrations of power" ("The Heresy…" 155), the beautiful compels or persuades, as I say in Chapter 1, not by forcing itself upon its audience's good sense or ability to comprehend its reasonableness but rather by appealing to its own intrinsic delightfulness—the experience of which can only be described as a gift or an invitation.

In this sense Skipper, in the very act of re-making himself, of supposedly "freeing" himself from the "repressive" memories and institutions of his past in exchange for a "wandering island" or novel "unlocated in space and quite out of time," commits a violence against himself as much as against his story's characters and its readers. By contrast, it is only when Parker enounces his

"given" name that he discover his true identity and can begin rejecting those impulses which had done him such violence in the past. Only when he responds to the "all demanding eyes" drawn in ink on his back, does his whole self become no longer "something haphazard and botched," but rather a "perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (*CW* 673). Certainly, Parker suffers in the end the physical violence of Sara Ruth's refusal to "see" the "body" she doesn't yet know, but it seems clear to me that the story unequivocally declares this to be an act of violence and makes no suggestion that Sara Ruth is acting as an artist.

In the end, "Parker's Back" depicts violence precisely as a failure to acknowledge in the other the infinite "givenness" of being, that is, the analogical relationship of both words and creation to the Word and Creator. By accurately naming things according to their identity and participation in Being—that is, by working for the good of that which is made—O'Connor's story does not enact a violence towards her audience, but rather seeks to lead them as if by the hand into an endless encounter with Beauty itself.[24]

[24] Nicholas Boyle suggests that it is precisely such an encounter where "the secular wisdom of the novel, like the sacred wisdom of the Bible, is taken up into the ten thousand faces of the Christ, risen in the Spirit, who is the supreme Wisdom of the Father" (189). For Boyle, as for O'Connor, "the face of the other, through being a face at all speaks with the voice of God; through being *this* face it is the face of Christ"(188).

Unlike Hawkes' artist for whom names become (quite literally) a kind of mark of Cain—a burden he can only escape by renaming and thus recreating himself in imaginary isolation—for O'Connor "naming" as an artist presents not the spontaneous "creation" *ex nihilo* of beauty, nor merely the possibility of an encounter with beauty. Rather, it demands a genuine participation in it, such that in the very act of "rendering" the universe, the participant (both as interpreter and co-creator) has herself been rendered more fully and is thus all the more able to perceive what Gerard Manley Hopkins called, "the dearest freshness deep down things." Like the first Adam, the artist's "naming of things" is not merely an arbitrary imposition (necessarily transgressive and coercive) of her imagination, a willful image making out of the "psychic sludge" which simply exist in her own unconscious mind. Rather, it is a participation by way of analogy in that infinite motion of beauty which names the namer herself out of the "unmasterable excess" of its own naming. Like the "sub-creator" artist in J.R.R. Tolkein's poem "Mythopoeia," O'Connor's "estranged" artist in "Parker's Back," "dethroned" and "dis-graced" though he may be, "make[s] still by the law in which [he was] made." And this "law," as David Hart's theological aesthetics has eloquently shown, neither permits nor proclaims violence, but only peace. It is, he concludes,

> An order of vision that thematizes the infinite according to the gaze of recognition and delight, which finds in every other the glory of

> the transcendent other, and which cannot turn away from the other because it has learned to see in the other the beauty of the crucified. Because the god who goes to his death in the form of a slave breaks open hearts, every face becomes an icon: a beauty that is infinite. If the knowledge of the light of the glory of God is given in the face of Jesus (2 Cor. 4:6), it is a knowledge that allows every other face to be seen in the light of that glory. (344)

It is this heart-breaking order of vision, "which cannot turn away from the other because it has learned to see in the other the beauty of the crucified," towards which we now turn.

CHAPTER SIX

"Intrud[ing] on the Timeless": Violence, Vision and the Reader's Vocation in *The Violent Bear It Away*

> When it is achieved, Christian form is the most beautiful thing that may be found in the human realm. […] Here, again, a new and sharper vision is required, and there is little hope that we will receive and use such eyes unless we have to some extent learned to see essential forms with our old ones. The supernatural is not there in order to supply that part of our natural capacities we have failed to develop. *Gratia perficit naturam, non supplet*.
>
> —Hans Urs von Balthasar (*Seeing the Form*, 28)

> To conclude, then: Christian morality is a labor of vision—to see the form of Christ, to see all creation as having been recapitulated in him, and to see in all other persons the possibility of discerning and adoring Christ's form in a new fashion.
>
> —David B. Hart (*The Beauty of the Infinite* 342)

The penultimate chapter of *The Violent Bear it Away* ends by saying that the young Francis Tarwater

> knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation. His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again. (*Three* 262)[1]

As O'Connor's readers know well, Tarwater's extraordinary vision is a result of a journey that is anything but ordinary. Indeed, it seems quite safe to say that

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[1] All references to *The Violent Bear It Away* in this chapter are from the edition printed in *3 By Flannery O'Connor*, New York: Penguin Books, 1983.

none of O'Connor's works has been more provocative or more divisive than her second and final novel-length work. For the terrible violence leading up to this point—the disabled child's assassination-cum-baptism and Tarwater's own drugged subjection to an act of sodomy—has long served as a convenient locus for delineating battle lines among O'Connor's critics. How one answers the aesthetic, ethical, and theological challenges posed by the young Tarwater's perilous journey towards the acceptance of his vocation as a prophet nearly always reflects how one might then receive the rest of O'Connor's work.

But the critical stakes are raised even higher given that this near-climactic point in Tarwater's development as a prophet[2] also harkens to O'Connor's own perspective on the role of the artist:

> The fiction writer should be characterized by his kind of vision. His kind of vision is prophetic vision. Prophecy, which is dependent on the imaginative and not the moral faculty, need not be a matter of predicting the future. The prophet is a realist of distances, and it is this kind of realism that goes into great novels. It is the realism which does not hesitate to distort appearances in order to show a hidden truth. (*MM* 179)

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[2] O'Connor's letters repeatedly attest to the fact that she was explicitly concerned with the prophetic vocation in her novel. To take just one of many examples, O'Connor says early on in a letter to John Hawkes, "The great-uncle is not a puritan her, as you saw. He is a prophet. And the boy doesn't just get himself saved by the skin of his teeth, he in the end prepare to be a prophet himself and to accept what prophets can expect from their earthly lives (the worst)." (*HB* 350). Perhaps more significantly, in a letter to Betty Hester, O'Connor admits "[…] I don't feel Tarwater is such a monster. I feel that in his place I would have done everything he did. Tarwater is made up out of my saying: what would I do here?" (*HB* 358)

Thus, perhaps more than anywhere else in O'Connor's fiction, readers are confronted by the haunting implications of a clear analogy between Tarwater the prophet and O'Connor the artist.[3] If the analogy holds true, then not only must her readers contend with the suggestion that perhaps the artist herself endures violence in order to convey the kind of "realism" which "goes into great novels," but they must also, as so many of her critics have, grapple with the suggestion that the artist achieves great art by baptizing and/or drowning the "dim-witted," which is to say, her readers as much as her characters.

As I demonstrated in the previous chapter, some readers like John Hawkes have long considered such a proposition to be a sign—perhaps *the* sign—of O'Connor's artistic genius. And, as I showed in Chapter Two, even those critics who ultimately seek to make the case that O'Connor's aesthetic is spiritually redemptive, have often been surprisingly willing to suggest that, like Tarwater, O'Connor's readers themselves must first endure a kind of violation at

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[3] Two essays in an early (1966) collection of criticism on O'Connor are representative of a general willingness to admit (with obvious variances) this comparison. Bernetta Quinn's essay on "Flannery O'Connor: The Realist of Distances" makes this point, though she only briefly discusses *The Violent Bear it Away* as one of many examples throughout O'Connor's work. While Albert Duhamel's "The Novelist as Prophet" focuses much more directly on the novel, his comparison with the southern collection of essays *I'll Take my Stand* concludes that the novel is primarily oriented toward burning "the South's eyes clean so that it could recognize its true heritage" (88). My approach, by contrast, seeks to demonstrate that the novel's vision of seeing applies to a much broader audience, has a primarily spiritual rather than regional orientation, and is consistent with O'Connor's desire to be seen as an artist, not just a "southern" artist *(MM* 36-39).

the hands of a parasitic "stranger" before they too can receive a vision beyond the ordinary. To take just one example, in his essay on "The Catholic Writer as Baptist," Albert Sonnenfeld argues that the Gospels present two orders of baptism, John the Baptist's and Christ's, and that O'Connor's fiction follows the former. "In other words," he suggests in his reading of O'Connor's biblical epigraph, "the kingdom of heaven does not suffer from violence: *it authorizes it*—and to the violent belongs the kingdom; they bear away the prize of salvation after the struggle" (446 emphasis mine). From this guiding assumption, Sonnenfeld then suggests that "Mason Tarwater's violence was the necessary final station of the old order," (449) that Rayber is essentially, "a Tarwater who has rejected violence and by this abdication failed," (450) and concludes that, "What the novelist does by means of violent plots and language, the characters do in their actions" (452).

In light of such readings, and as a way of clarifying what it might mean then for O'Connor to "precipitate an act of reading that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*" (Sykes 44), I have sought to make the case throughout this dissertation that such polarized (and polarizing) approaches to O'Connor stem from the same error: an inadequate conception of Beauty and a subsequent inability to conceive of a rhetoric which rejects the notion of an inextricable, unavoidable violence and whose form of persuasion permits only of peace. Furthermore, as O'Connor's

own near-conflation of "prophecy" and "vision" might suggest, we must acknowledge that this failure stems also from an inadequate conception of what it means to see. When O'Connor says (on more than one occasion) that "for the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye," (*MM* 91, 144) it should come as no surprise that a novel about a person struggling against his prophetic calling would be riddled with references to its character's eyes and the way they see things—after all, "prophecy is a matter of seeing near things with their extensions of meaning and thus of seeing far things close up" (*MM* 44).[4] But the significance of vision in O'Connor's thinking, as we have already seen, clearly has implications for the apprehension of art as well:

> the way to read a book is always to see what happens, but in a good novel more always happens than we are able to take in at

[4] O'Connor criticism has often emphasized the many ways in which O'Connor explicitly uses visual imagery as a metaphor for the spiritual development of her characters, particularly Hazel Motes in *Wise Blood*. See for example, Driskell and Britain's *Eternal Crossroads* (40–58, 63). While the visual certainly is an explicit trope of *Wise Blood,* the rest of this essay will suggest that the visual is more intrinsic, more built in to the narrative of *The Violent Bear it Away,* and is perhaps, therefore, more crucial to understanding O'Connor's project. Surprisingly, relatively little criticism has drawn out this important element of O'Connor's second great work. Trowbridge's essay on "The Symbolic Vision of Flannery O'Connor" focuses mostly on her use of symbols rather than the literal visual imagery she employs. Donald Hardy's *Narrating Knowledge in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction* is a comprehensive linguistic/statistical analysis of O'Connor's fiction which provides more than adequate "empirical" support for the claim I make that references to the visual pervades the entirety of her second novel. In the end, however, because he shares the same sort of assumptions about scholarship and knowledge that I think O'Connor explicitly refutes in her last novel, he is not able to make much more of a claim than, "Seeing and not seeing, claiming to have seen and claiming not to have seen all are important revelatory and revealing acts in most of O'Connor's fiction" (116).

> once, more happens than meets the eye. The mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest. (*MM* 74)

Given, then, this centrality of the visual in O'Connor's framework and her related concerns about the creation of art and its hermeneutical implications for the reader, the following chapter demonstrates how the narrator's many references to vision and seeing in *The Violent Bear It Away* reveal not only the spiritual state of her characters but becomes in itself an argument about how to make and interpret art. In her employment of the language of vision O'Connor criticizes both the assumptions and the scope of a strictly empiricist or even humanist conception of reality as one that ultimately refuses to acknowledge its own self-serving, self-perpetuating dependence on violence. Instead, I argue, she offers a competing definition for "reasonableness" that is grounded in a vision of a deeper, spiritual reality akin to what David Hart calls the "suasive loveliness" of beauty in the Christian story (*The Beauty* 5). Rather than enacting a fundamental violence toward her characters, herself as artist, or her readers, in *The Violent Bear it Away* O'Connor ultimately undermines and explicitly rejects what Hart calls a narrative "of primordial and inevitable violence" (*The Beauty* 5).

Indeed, I suggest the exact opposite as Sonnenfeld and so many others have: the Gospels do not *authorize* violence, they undermine it; Mason Tarwater

preaches a vision of an old order made new precisely by rejecting the notion of violence as "necessary;" Rayber's failure is not in rejecting violence, but in his unwillingness to admit the violence of his self-willed and supposedly humanitarian outlook which nonetheless reduces the other to a mere object of his gaze; and finally, what the author accomplishes precisely in working for "the good of that which is made" is not an act of violence towards her characters or readers, but rather a consequence of, a genuine gift, of beauty's particular rhetoric in persuasion of a vision of peace. Unlike the violence of their attempts to satisfy or ignore their hunger for Beauty that Rayber and Tarwater experience throughout the novel, the story ends with a vision of a feast in which the true self neither consumes nor is consumed, but is rather given and received in an echo of the eternal Triune *perichoresis.* Such a self, the novel seems to suggest in light of David Hart, is genuinely "free to be itself" only as it becomes persuaded by the genuine delight which beauty already takes in it, on the one hand, and the desire for beauty towards which it is provoked, on the other.

To make this case, I first delineate the competing visions of vision between the old prophet, Mason Tarwater, and his nephew Rayber. Though Mason's "mad," almost quixotic view of the world portends a kind of unpredictability and volatility which is certainly not "safe," Rayber's tendency to make others into objects of study or mere symbols ultimately reveals the true violence of his

vision, despite (or perhaps because of) his professed humanism. By then exploring references to seeing and vision throughout Francis Tarwater's pilgrimage, I suggest that the progression of what it means to have vision in *The Violent Bear it Away* is akin to the medieval perspective on the fourfold levels of interpretation (a hermeneutical approach O'Connor endorsed but doubted modernity could ever understand) and culminates in the anagogical realm where one is led, as Peter Candler says, "through the contemplation of future glory to the reimagination of temporal existence in light of the Incarnation, as imbued with the grace of divine creation and ordered to its consummation" ("Anagogical" 12).[5] Such a "reimagination of temporal existence," as Tarwater's journey suggests, may entail excruciating personal suffering, but it is not, I argue, ultimately a consequence of an inevitable violence, but rather the explicit rejection of it. Indeed, such a "reimagination" is both the means and end for

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[5] Many other critics have addressed the "fourfold" method of reading in O'Connor. For example, Baker's essay on "Flannery O'Connor's Four-Fold Method of Allegory" suggests a way to read the novel in those terms, though I think he often conflates the allegorical with the anagogical dimension and thus weakens his own argument. One might also consult Davies' "Anagogical Signals in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," Grimes' "Anagogy and Ritualization: Baptism in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away"* or Linehan's "Anagogical Realism in Flannery O'Connor." Though somewhat helpful, there is no clear consensus between the three articles on what "anagogy" means for O'Connor and the reader. And while only Grimes' article sees this dimension specifically in *The Violent Bear it Away,* his focus is primarily on O'Connor's portrayal of baptism, whereas I emphasize the way in which the language and images O'Connor uses prophetically leads the reader to read anagogically. In this regard, though it does not dwell much on *The Violent Bear it Away,* Candler's essay on "The Anagogical Imagination of Flannery O'Connor," offers a concise, but thorough account of the anagogical in O'Connor and a much needed corrective to most of the previous critical efforts to address the same.

Beauty's particular rhetorical persuasion, and I contend that it is ultimately this beatific vision of a world transfigured towards which Tarwater and O'Connor's readers are propelled—that is, so long as they have the eyes to see and the ears to hear.

Mason Tarwater's "Violent, Impossible Vision of a World Transfigured" vs. Rayber's Micro-scope

From the very beginning of the novel, O'Connor sets Mason Tarwater's prophetic vision in opposition to the strict naturalism or empiricism of Rayber's vision. At the realization that his nephew has been "planting traps around the house and watching him fall into them," that his nephew's charity has proved uncharitable, and that instead he has been made a subject of Rayber's academic study (125), the narrator tells us that the Lord sent the old Tarwater "a rage of vision" to kidnap his great nephew and teach him the "hard facts of serving the Lord" (126). Most often, this instruction happens by means of the old Tarwater sharing his own story with the young Tarwater, but this is often a thankless task and at one point he is forced to "stop and stare in front of him as if he were looking into a pit which had opened up before his feet" (127). Such moments prompt Mason Tarwater to go out into the woods alone "while he thrashed out his peace with the Lord," after which he would return looking "the way the boy thought a prophet ought to look. [...] as if he had been wrestling a wildcat, as if

his head were still full of the visions he had seen in its eyes" (127). Clearly, the young Tarwater is captivated by his great uncle's vision, for only in the moments "when there was no fire in his uncle's eye and he spoke only of the sweat and stink of the cross," does the boy find it convenient to let his mind wander (128). But when the great uncle dies suddenly at the breakfast table, there is nowhere for the boy to run: "[the old man's] eyes, dead silver, were focused on the boy across from him. Tarwater felt the tremor transfer itself and run lightly over him" (129). It is as if Mason Tarwater's eyes are still speaking even in death, for after a few uncomfortable minutes of silence, the young Tarwater is forced to respond to the corpse sitting in front of him, "Just hold your horses. I already told you I would do it right."

Above all, what the old man had hoped to instill in Francis Tarwater was that he was "free" to be his "own self,"(132) and "not a piece of information inside of [Rayber's] head!" (133). At one point, Francis tests Mason regarding his specific knowledge of Rayber in hopes of discrediting his uncle's testimony, but Mason replies, "What difference does the color [of his eyes] make when I know the look? I know what's behind it […]. Nothing. He's full of nothing […]. He don't know its anything he can't know" (156). Like all good storytellers and prophets, Mason is perceptive in a much deeper sense and bases much of his judgments about another's character by what he can or cannot see in their eyes.

When telling about his attempt to stay with the schoolteacher, the old man says that Rayber's

> expression hadn't even set on his face yet. I could still see the seven-year-old boy that had gone off with me, except that now he had a pair of black-rimmed glasses and a nose big enough to hold them up. The size of his eyes had shrunk because his face had grown but it was the same face all right. You could see behind it to what he really wanted to say. (164)

For Mason the prophet, seeing things as they really are involves first seeing beyond the surface and then judging what he sees. For better or worse, he knows "the look" Rayber has and ascertains a great depth of meaning from what he reads there. Above all, what he sees and judges in Rayber's depth is that he lacks depth, or rather, has refused the very things which allow him to engage his world meaningfully.

Indeed, as the novel progresses and some of Rayber's assumptions are tested, the reader also sees that behind the spectacles, behind his grand vision of the self-willed man, behind his social charity and hopes for education, Rayber's fundamental outlook is quite literally self-refuting. Rayber defends his perspective saying that the great dignity of man "is his ability to say: I am born once and no more. What I can see and do for myself and my fellow man in this

life is all of my portion and I'm content with it. It's enough to be a man" (225).[6] The reader knows, however, that Rayber is not seeing the whole picture, and his contentment in only acknowledging an individual reality which he can see and do for himself sounds in the end like mere foolish bravado. As readers, we sense something fake about the schoolteacher and perhaps notice along with the innkeeper that "his eyes had a peculiar look—like something human trapped in a switch box" (216). By the end of the novel, what O'Connor seems to suggest is that if we remove Rayber's external trappings, his glasses and hearing aid among other things, what we get is a man who despite his tremendous book knowledge and ethical fortitude, knows the least about himself of any character in the novel. His vision truly is artificial and ultimately only as deep as the props he has around him.

When the young Tarwater shows up on his doorstep, Rayber's "eyes had the look now of being trained on a fascinating problem. [… Rayber] peered into [Tarwater's] face as if he were beginning to see a solution, one that intrigued him with its symmetry and rightness" (176). Part of the artificiality of Rayber's

[6] In a later example, the schoolteacher tries to re-appropriate and subvert the old prophet's Christian images: "If there's any way to be born again, it's a way that you accomplish yourself, an understanding about yourself that reach after a long time, perhaps a long effort. It's nothing you get from above by spilling a little water and a few words" (238). While there's a partial truth in saying that being born again is a kind of understanding about oneself that is often long in coming, his greatest mistake is to think that that kind of knowledge of one's self comes purely from within.

vision, in contrast to Mason Tarwater's wild, incendiary vision, is that it attempts to describe the whole of reality as a neat, geometrical problem that can be easily solved if only one has the right theorems in the right order. But his vision ultimately seeks ownership rather than genuine knowledge, for even in his attempt to comfort Tarwater he reveals, "Now you belong to someone who can help you and understand you" (177). Sensing Rayber's motivations, the young Tarwater hardens his expression to "keep his thought from being exposed," and yet, "the schoolteacher did not notice any change. He gazed through the actual insignificant boy before him to an image of him that he held fully developed in his mind" (177). A few pages later we see that this "image" of Tarwater, for all of his empathy and kinship with the boy, reveals a kind of narcissism: "'This is our problem together,' [Rayber] said, seeing himself so clearly in the face before him that he might have been beseeching his own image" (187). And towards the end of the novel, when Rayber is trying to convince Tarwater that he is no exception to the fact that "there are certain laws that determine every man's conduct," the reader, along with Rayber this time, sees "with perfect clarity that the only feeling he had for this boy was hate. He loathed the very sight of him" (238).

It bears repeating that Rayber's mode of vision is strikingly reminiscent of the bad fiction writers O'Connor refers to in her essay on "The Nature and Aim of Fiction." She says, beginning fiction writers

> are concerned primarily with unfleshed ideas and emotions. They are apt to be reformers because they are possessed not by a story but by the bare bones of some abstract notion. They are conscious of problems, not of people, of questions and issues, not of the texture of existence, of case histories and of everything that has a sociological smack, instead of with all those concrete details of life that make actual the mystery of our position on earth. (*MM* 67–68)

O'Connor attributed such a Rayberian impulse to see problems rather than people to a modern form of Manicheanism, but she did not limit it to would-be artists. Indeed, as we have already seen, there is no shortage of references in her writings to *readers* who care only for the abstraction and always seek a kind of ownership over the text:

> [Some readers] seem to think that [a symbol] is a way of saying something that you aren't actually saying, and so if they can be got to read a reputedly symbolic work at all, they approach it as if it were a problem in algebra. Find *x*. And when they do find or think they find this abstraction, *x*, then they go off with an elaborate sense of satisfaction and the notion that they have "understood" the story. (*MM* 71)[7]

[7] Elsewhere O'Connor remarks: "The naturalistic bias has so well saturated our society that the reader doesn't realize that he has to shift his sights to read fiction which treats of an encounter with God. […] This reader has first to get rid of purely sociological point of view." (*MM* 163–64). Later, in the same essay, she says, "Today's reader, if he believes in grace at all, sees it as something which can be separated from nature and served to him raw as Instant Uplift. This reader's favorite word is compassion " (*MM* 167). Her response to William Sessions (and, by implication, much of the literary criticism industry over the last fifty years) is especially damning: "I'm sorry the book [*TVBIA*] didn't come off for you but I think it is no wonder it didn't since you see everything in terms of sex symbols, and in a way that would not enter my head— the lifted bough, the fork of the tree, the corkscrew. It doesn't seem to be conceivable to you that such things merely have a natural place in the story, a natural use. Your criticism sounds to me as if you have read too many critical books and are too smart in an artificial, destructive, and very limited way. […] The Freudian technique can be applied to anything at all with equally

Thus, much like O'Connor's budding artists and willful readers, throughout most of the novel Rayber clearly perpetrates the violence of what Hart describes as "a speculative appropriation of the aesthetic moment in the service of a supposedly more vital and essential meaning" (*The Beauty* 25). But as we saw in Chapter Two, beauty, by its very definition within a Christian aesthetic theology, guards against our gnostic tendencies and always resists being reduced or reducing the other to the merely symbolic. Both as would-be author and interpreter of his world, Rayber is thus utterly tone deaf and blind to the claims beauty would make upon him.

And yet, ironically, it is precisely this propensity towards making out of the other a symbol that caused O'Connor the most difficulty as she wrote the novel. In a letter to John Hawkes, O'Connor admits that

> Rayber, of course, was the stumbling block. I had a version of this book about a year ago in which Rayber was really no more than a caricature. He may have been better that way but the book as a whole was not. It may just be a matter of giving the devil his due….I had no trouble writing the first chapter and the last thirty pages; I spent most of the seven years on Rayber … (*HB* 353)

In fact, despite laboring over her portrayal of Rayber for so long, O'Connor was never fully convinced that she had done him justice as a character, but rather

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ridiculous results. The fork of the tree! My Lord, Billy, recover your simplicity. You ain't in Manhattan" (*HB* 407).

made of him a caricature, a mere symbol.[8] Many of her readers since then have concurred and made the case that, especially in her portrayal of Rayber, O'Connor commits a kind of violence against her art.

Nonetheless, it is telling that to the degree to which O'Connor eventually overcame this difficulty, she did so precisely by allowing Rayber to be susceptible to the mysterious persuasion of Bishop's true beauty, to the compelling, yet non-violent rhetoric of his very presence. For at least a few, brief moments in the novel, we see that even Rayber knows and rightly fears surrendering to the reality he glimpses. Even though his "normal way of looking on Bishop was as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of his fate," Rayber is also sometimes willing to admit that the presence of this "simple equation that required no further solution" could sometimes overwhelm him with

> a horrifying love. Anything that he looked at too long could bring it on. […] If, without thinking, he lent himself to it, he would feel suddenly a morbid surge of the love that terrified him—powerful enough to throw him to the ground in an act of idiot praise. It was completely irrational and abnormal. (192)

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[8] In her letters to John Hawkes (October 6 and November 20, 1959), O'Connor makes the explicit connection between the devil/stranger and Rayber's philosophy, but she acknowledges the difficulty in making Rayber human: "I had meant for Meeks and the pervert at the end to take on the form of Tarwater's Friend, and when I first set out I had in mind that Rayber would echo all his friend's sentiments in a form that the reader would identify himself with. With trial and error I found that making Rayber pure evil made him a caricature and took away from the role of the old prophet since it left him nothing worth trying to save" (*HB* 359).

It is no surprise that Rayber can deal with "love in general" for "He saw the value of it and how it could be used," but, with Bishop present,

> The love that would overcome him was of a different order entirely. It was not the kind that could be used for the child's improvement or his own. It was love without reason, love for something futureless, *love that appeared to exist only to be itself, imperious and all demanding*, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant. (192 emphasis mine)

Tellingly, when this love that exists "only to be itself" overcomes him, Rayber associates it with the memory and presence of his uncle and "always felt with it a rush of longing to have the old man's eyes—insane, fish-colored, violent with their impossible vision of a world transfigured—turned on him once again" (192).

Even so, the novel goes on to show, Rayber ultimately is unwilling to surrender to this "irrational and abnormal" power, so he keeps "it from gaining control over him by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline." Much like O.E. Parker who refuse to "take long looks at anything," Rayber "did not look at anything too long, he denied his senses unnecessary satisfactions" (193). And when Tarwater voices the logical conclusion to Rayber's way of looking at Bishop as an *x*—that Bishop is no more than a hog since the only difference "between me and you and a hog is me and you can calculate"—the schoolteacher's only way of making sense of Bishop's state is to say, "He's just a mistake of nature. Try not even to be aware of him" (194).

But "nature" in Rayber's scheme of things is fated, deterministic and therefore cannot really make a "mistake." The existence of error implies the presence of intention, and yet Rayber refuses to acknowledge that history is more than a natural unfolding of a biological process. Nature thus becomes signficant only in so far that it is useful or serves his purposes: "What we understand, we can control" (237). Paying close attention for Rayber, therefore, is important only because by it he gains ownership, which is to say, power. But Bishop's presence in the novel constantly repudiates this assumption (ideologically and practically), for his mere existence undermines a mathematical, utilitarian understanding of the world and more importantly, exerts a mysterious power over him which completely transcends and subverts his resolute will: "Every problem [Tarwater] had [Rayber] had had himself and had conquered, or had for the most part conquered, for he had not conquered the problem of Bishop. He had only learned to live with it and he had learned too that he could not live without it" (190). Not only is the "problem" of Bishop's existence irresolvable, but its insolvability becomes a necessary condition for Rayber's existence, despite the opposition it presents to his isolationist resolution.[9] Ultimately, I argue, it is

[9] A later example further illustrates the tension (or perhaps inconsistency) in Rayber's worldview. When a group of dancers encounters Bishop, the narrator describes their look as "shocked and affronted as if they had been betrayed by a fault in creation, something that should have been corrected before they were allowed to see it" (235). Despite the fact that Rayber himself

Bishop's unaccountable presence which creates the tension of the story and finally unravels Rayber's carefully, but foolishly constructed view of the world. Moreover, in terms of O'Connor's craft, it is Bishop and Rayber's inability to resist the mysterious claim Bishop has on him which keeps Rayber from becoming a mere caricature, an "x" which O'Connor could use to get across her point. Thus, for both Rayber and O'Connor's readers, Bishop's presence poses a constant challenge to see a reality beyond the surface, to courageously engage in an intimacy that demands a kind of judging, and to take one's assumptions about reality to their final conclusions, despite the real danger this might pose towards the ostensibly self-"preserving" narratives we tell about ourselves. This, I have suggested, is precisely the peaceful, non-coercive challenge that an "imperious and all-demanding" beauty poses and the promise it gives: a love "which exists only to be itself" and, in doing so, frees all others to do the same.

So perhaps this tension between Mason's and Rayber's philosophies is what O'Connor has in mind when she says,

> The [modern] novelist is asked to begin with an examination of statistics rather than with an examination of conscience. Or if he must examine his conscience, he is asked to do so in the light of statistics. I'm afraid, though that this is not the way the novelist

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as declared Bishop a "mistake of nature," he is visibly angry at the young dancers and we are told that "With pleasure Rayber could have dashed across the room and swung his lifted chair in their faces" (235).

> uses his eyes. For him, judgment is implicit in the act of seeing. His vision cannot be detached from his moral sense. (130)

As we have seen, the belief that there is more to life than a pseudo-scientific reduction of existence to a mere quantity and pattern of numbers—something which forces one to take the moral risk of staking a claim, of judging things according to some established rule of goodness—pervades O'Connor's entire aesthetic philosophy. In her essay on "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" O'Connor echoes this conflict between modernity and the artist and states that for the last two centuries, "the popular spirit of each succeeding age has tended more and more to the view that the ills and mysteries of life will eventually fall before the scientific advances of man." A writer of fiction who "is in tune with this spirit," therefore, "will be concerned above all with an accurate reproduction of the things that most immediately concern man, with the natural forces that he feels control his destiny" (*MM* 41). But even though O'Connor's characterization of the modern consciousness concedes a potential for making art, her optimism belies a harsh criticism of the scope of such an assumption—its visual platform is after all narrow and the best one might hope for is for it to be transcended. [10]

"On the other hand," O'Connor suggests,

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[10] It is a possible, she grants, that such a writer will produce a "great tragic naturalism, for by his responsibility to the things he sees, he may transcend the limitations of his narrow vision" (*MM* 41).

> if the writer believes that our life is and will remain essentially mysterious, if he looks upon us as beings existing in a created order to whose laws we freely respond, then what he sees on the surface will be of interest to him only as he can go through it into an experience of mystery itself" (*MM* 41).

For O'Connor, herein lies true personal and artistic freedom, but it is above all, a freedom of vision. Moreover, as we saw in Chapter Four, it was precisely the presence of mystery for O'Connor that in fact made the counterintuitive case for the necessity of and freeing consequences of dogma:

> Christian dogma is about the only thing left in the world that surely guards and respects mystery. The fiction writers is an observer, first, last, and always, but he cannot be an adequate observer unless he is free from uncertainty about what he sees. […] Open and free observation is founded on our ultimate faith that universe is meaningful, as the Church teaches. (*MM* 178)

By stark contrast, an outlook which assumes (if only the right "scope" is employed) that reality is finite and plumbable is exactly that: an out-look. It says little or nothing about the inward mystery of humans reacting to circumstances which are just as mysterious and provides no cohesive way of understanding (which, in the Christian account, implies action as well as knowing) how an individual character or event plays into the larger story. But even in a strictly naturalist approach, O'Connor assumes the potential for redemption because it is, when undertaken honestly, at least a challenge to see things more deeply and

clearly.[11] And when the act of truly seeing reveals one's own blindness and compels one to enter through that into something greater, one can finally, in O'Connor's view, begin to appreciate and make art.

Thus, in contrast to an empiricist approach which would restrict reality to what is available to the senses, the best kind of art for O'Connor is always anagogical: "The kind of vision the fiction writer needs to have, or to develop, in order to increase the meaning of his story is called anagogical vision, and that is the kind of vision that is able to see different levels of reality in one image or one situation" (*MM* 72). In the very act of perceiving the concrete, tangible elements of human existence one can recognize a truth or meaning therein which transfigures the object of perception without diminishing it.[12] In order to perceive this greater meaning, however, one must first pay close to attention to what happens on the surface and it this quality of perception which is so

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[11] Elsewhere O'Connor suggests that "Any discipline can help your writing: logic, mathematics, theology, and of course and particularly drawing. Anything that helps you to see, anything that makes you look. The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that doesn't require his attention." (*MM* 84)

[12] Grimes' qualifications of the general meaning of anagogy are especially helpful here: "When O'Connor speaks of a gesture as 'anagogical,' she means that its mystery is irreducible and that it requires an exaggerated, hyperbolic form of expression. It is unlike any other and cannot be explained away by sociological or psychological reductions, or even literary ones for that matter" (15); "[…] we have to say that for [O'Connor] anagogy elevates by conjoining opposites. Anagogy does not merely transfer what is below to a position above. Instead, it makes a whole of what is above and what is below. But in so doing, the tension between opposites is retained, not dissolved" (17).

essential to the creation of O'Connor's fiction. A few excerpts here will suffice: "For the writer of fiction, everything has its testing point in the eye, and the eye is an organ that eventually involves the whole personality, and as much of the world as can be got into it" (*MM* 91, 141); "The novelist writes about what he sees on the surface, but his angle of vision is such that he begins to see before he gets to the surface and he continues to see after he has gone past it" (*MM* 131); there is "a certain grain of stupidity that the writer of fiction can hardly do without, and this is the quality of having to stare, of not getting the point at once" (*MM* 77); "I think [writing fiction] is more than just a discipline, although it is that; I think it is a way of looking at the created world and of using the sense so as to make them find as much meaning as possible in things"(*MM* 131).

Clearly, when O'Connor says that "In the novelist's case, prophecy is a matter of seeing […]" (41) and that the fiction writer's "kind of vision is prophetic vision" (179), one need not be too imaginative to read these statements along with *The Violent Bear it Away* and see that in many ways the process and challenge that confronts Tarwater is precisely the one that confronts the artist.[13] Not only are Tarwater and the artist, according to O'Connor's conception, both

[13] In fact her explanation of Tarwater in a letter to Robert Lowell (February 2, 1960) echoes these sentiments almost verbatim: "Prophecy is a matter of seeing, not saying, and is certainly the most terrible vocation" (*HB* 372).

prophets, but they are prophets precisely when they possess the ability to see. What the novel seems to be suggesting, then, is that the artists' and Tarwater's vocations are both threatened by philosophies which seek to define reality according to its use and function. But rather than shun a kind of involvement which puts one supposed dominion or superiority at risk, the prophet refuses to limit existence to what appears on the surface and attempts instead to provide an intimate—the deepest and most accurate—account of what life is, despite the possible danger implied to his or her own way of viewing the world.[14]

Thus, the "problem of Bishop," the problem of a "nature" that continually speaks to an order which transcends function and use, is as much Tarwater's as Rayber's. Indeed, in the end, O'Connor shows that whether they like it or not, every character in this novel must be aware of and contend with Bishop's existence, if only as an anomaly their worldview must account for or disingenuously dismiss altogether. But for one "cursed" with a prophetic vision the question is all the more pertinent and so whichever way Tarwater will go between Mason and Rayber, he must first contend with Bishop: either he will

[14] For O'Connor, even writing is dangerous, for the fiction writer "begins to see in the depths of himself, and it seems to me that his position there rests on what must certainly be the bedrock of all human experience—the experience of limitation or, if you will, of poverty" (131).

destroy him and thus (supposedly) fully revolt against his prophetic calling, or he will baptize him and accept his vocation. He cannot simply ignore him.

Francis Tarwater's Quest: A Stranger in that Violent Country

Early on, O'Connor reveals Francis Tarwater's opposition to his uncle's "mad" vision; he prefers, it seems, a much more objective, disinterested, utilitarian approach:

> He tried when possible [...] to keep his vision located on an even level, to see no more than what was in front of his face and to let his eyes stop at the surface of that. It was as if he were afraid that if he let his eye rest for an instant longer than was needed to place something [...] that the thing would suddenly stand before him, strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. He did all he could to avoid this threatened intimacy of creation. (136)

Unlike the pre-fallen Adam who in the Christian tradition rightfully names the creatures according to their essences, Tarwater (much like Rayber) prevents his vision from moving beyond a shallow, strictly utilitarian understanding. He lacks the courage to go deeper because he knows that doing so, that having an intimacy in which he must judge and be judged will exert a kind of control over him. He knows that paying attention to something—even "a spade, a hoe, the mule's hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow behind him" (136)—beyond its immediate use for the moment has potentially terrifying ethical and spiritual implications, and thus, he is more willing to sacrifice whatever insights or

experience he might gain by this apprehension than he is willing to surrender himself in order to receive it.

A few paragraphs later, however, the reader sees that despite himself, Tarwater is not always capable of constraining his vision, for even in the briefest encounters he makes deep connections and retains a memory of his experience. He recalls seeing Bishop for the first time and notices that "the little boy somewhat resembled old Tarwater except for his eyes which were grey like the old man's but clear, as if the other side of them went down and down into two pools of light" (136). And even though, as we shall see, Tarwater is ultimately mistaken in his assessment that Bishop "did not have any sense," not only does he notice an affinity between the old man and the "dim-witted" child, but his is experience is such that "he could not forget [Bishop]" (136).

Indeed, throughout the rest of the story, Tarwater is unable to finally shake off his great uncle's influence or ignore Bishop's constant presence despite Rayber's and "the stranger's" efforts to the contrary. Impossible as it really is for Tarwater, avoiding this deeper engagement is what makes the most "sense" for both the stranger and Rayber. Thus, one of the stranger's first tasks is to convince Tarwater that he can do anything he wants to, even if it means killing off all of the chickens—his entire livelihood—out of spite:

> "Now I can do anything I want to," he said, softening the stranger's voice so that he could stand it. Could kill off all those chickens if I

> had a mind to, he thought watching the worthless black game bantams that his uncle had been fond of keeping. (137)

Clearly, there is no sense of "intimacy with creation" here, only a sense of one's power to define things according to their use (or perhaps worse, one's whims), and it eerily foreshadows Rayber's justification for attempting to drown his boy who will be "Five years old for all eternity, useless forever" (143).

At times, particularly when he is with Rayber, Tarwater seems to embody Rayber's philosophy: "Silent, he viewed everything with the same noncommittal eye as if he found nothing here worth holding his attention but must keep moving, …" (189). But even here, even though Tarwater's detachment reminds the reader of Rayber's abstraction, Tarwater's vision is shifty not primarily because what is in front of him is worthless but because he "must keep searching for whatever it was that appeared just beyond his vision" (189). The knowledge that something can exist beyond his vision, that the world is not merely a series of equations waiting to be solved, seems to be—despite, or perhaps, because of his repeated efforts to deny it—what compels Tarwater (and we might say, the novel) to continue searching. When Tarwater stops at a store window to look at a loaf of bread, an image which suggests the "Bread of Life" that Tarwater is unsuccessfully rejecting, his face looks "like the face of someone starving who sees a meal he can't reach. […] He hung there as if he could not take his eyes off what it was he wanted" (197).

Ultimately, it is Tarwater's acute vision, part of which he has inherited from his great-uncle, that constitutes his greatest defense against Rayber and the stranger's essentially nihilistic philosophy. At one point, Tarwater gives

> the schoolteacher a long appraising look, tracing the line of his jaw, the two creases on either side of his mouth, the forehead extending into skull until it reached the pie-shaped hairline. He gazed briefly at the pained eyes behind his uncle's glasses, appearing to abandon a search for something that could not possibly be there. (187)

In this instance, we see an implied connection between the tremendous detail Tarwater is capable of noticing and the acute assessment he makes regarding what resides in Rayber's depths. It is no surprise, then, that in continuing this visual survey Tarwater will immediately deliver one of his most innocently-wry, but searing castigations of Rayber—this time in the form of a question. Noticing Rayber's hearing contraption in his front shirt pocket, Tarwater asks "Do you think in the box […] or do you think in your head?" (187). That this is no innocuous observation is evidenced by the way Rayber evades the question and instead embarks on an angry tirade blaming the young Tarwater for his loss of hearing. The point is that Tarwater has hit a nerve and, perhaps unwittingly, has undermined the schoolteacher's efforts to "civilize" him by calling attention to the abstraction and artificiality of Rayber's own sensory perceptions.

In his defense, Rayber notices that the only thing to give Tarwater "pause" is Bishop, and that because "Bishop looked like the old man [Mason] grown

backwards to the lowest form of innocence," Tarwater "strictly avoided looking [Bishop] in the eye" (191). Though Rayber rightly perceives that Tarwater's refusal to meet Bishop's eye indicates a chink in the boy's resolve to remain un-intimate with his surroundings, he is greatly mistaken in thinking that Bishop is harmless and that developing the ability to look Bishop in the eye signifies some sort of mastery over the idiot child and himself.[15] Rather than being "a sign of returning health," (214) it is only after Tarwater has finally resolved to drown Bishop (221) that he is able to coldly stare back into Bishop's eyes (227, 228). Indeed, Rayber's conviction concerning the mastery granted to him by the gaze is shown to be incoherent and innefectual when out of pity he himself tries to "save" the child preacher Lucette Carmody by staring back at her (203). But her increasingly concentrated attention on him eventually overwhelms him instead and forces him to duck out of her sight and turn off his hearing aid (205). Though on a literal level we see that his "spectacled eyes" are no match for Lucette's "large and dark and fierce" eyes, we know from previous examples that it is what lies behind the eyes—one's conception of the nature of reality and

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[15] Rayber restates his belief later, though somewhat qualified, in speaking to Tarwater: "I notice that you've begun to be able to look Bishop in the eye. That's good. It means you're making progress but you needn't think that because you can look him in the eye now, you've saved yourself from what's preying on you" (236). Ironically, the only kind of "progress" Tarwater is making at this stage is in his ability to murder Bishop, and being capable of looking the boy in the eye does not actually undo the compulsion he has to baptize Bishop.

the potential for comprehending it—that is ultimately the most compelling. Despite the confidence with which he puts forth his view of science and society, Rayber's inner discrepancy is echoed again when he admits later that "It was the [old man's] eyes that got to me [...]. Children may be attracted to mad eyes. A grown person could have resisted. A child couldn't. Children are cursed with believing" (224). Here again, Rayber equates being compelled by another's vision with childishness and an attraction to madness, though clearly even he has never successfully revoked the "curse." But, as readers, we sense as we see the ethical weakness of Rayber's philosophy that the opposite is actually true: that an "idiot" child and a child preacher can have the wisdom and perception of old age; that rejecting belief is actually childish though not childlike; that the true curse is self-inflicted and comes to those who refuse the truth about themselves; and that having a mature understanding of self and others would mean understanding Mason's prophetic visions not as a madness but rather, "as if he beheld an unspeakable mystery" (142).

It is this "unspeakable mystery" about a reality or purpose beneath the surface of one's vision (which Mason has passed on to Francis and which Bishop actively embodies) that ultimately compels Tarwater to baptize Bishop, even if his competing, self-asserting instinct allows him to murder Bishop as well. Rayber's account of his own attempt to drown the "useless" idiot foregrounds

Tarwater's first real attempt to baptize Bishop, and the reader sees again that it is only when Rayber "let himself look" at Bishop's "wrathfully contorted" face struggling against him under the water, that his will is weakened and he is unable to carry out his murderous task, despite the moral sanction granted to him by his utilitarian reasoning (208). This same tension between the will and vision is echoed again when the narrator describes Tarwater as,

> arrested in the middle of a step. His eyes were on the child in the pool but they burned as if he beheld some terrible compelling vision. […] Tarwater began to move toward [Bishop]. He seemed to be drawn toward the child in the water but to be pulling back, exerting an almost equal pressure away from what attracted him. (210).

Tarwater's resistance is not sufficient, however, and Rayber (who "had the sense that he was moving blindly, that where Bishop was he saw only a spot of light" [211]) is forced to "rescue" Bishop from the impending baptism, despite his constant avowal that it is only an "empty rite" (211, 225, 237). In Tarwater's own recollection of the incident, he describes feeling "again the approach of mystery" (220), seeing that "A blinding brightness fell on [the fountain …]. Then the light, falling more gently, rested like a hand on [Bishop's] white head" (221), and that he "exerted a force backward but he continued nevertheless to move toward the pool" (221). After Rayber "snatche[s] the dimwit out," Tarwater is left staring "into the water where a wavering face seemed trying to form itself. Gradually it became distinct and still, gaunt and cross-shaped. He observed, deep in its eyes,

a look of starvation" (221). Tarwater's reflection in the would-be baptism pool reveals not only an image of the sweaty, stinking cross of Jesus that he is trying to avoid, but shows him as he really is: starving and yearning for something else to fill a deep void, despite his own self-reliant vision.[16]

Tarwater's moment of self-revelation, however, is quickly tempered by his encounter with "the stranger" whose "eyes held a malevolent promise of unwanted friendship" (222). Towards the end of the novel now, the stranger again attempts to convince Tarwater that there is no reality he can perceive or be responsible for outside of himself: "You're alone in the world, with only yourself to ask or thank or judge; with only yourself" (222). The kind of vision he develops, however, eerily echoes Rayber's naïve optimism for unmasking and subduing reality, though this time it is turned on Rayber himself: "Tarwater had observed [Rayber's] discomposure; he was looking at him with a distinct attention, a peculiar prescient look as if he were about to penetrate some secret" (223).[17] Tarwater's sinister vision, however, has Bishop as its main target to overcome—the main presence to be penetrated:

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[16] Indeed, Tarwater seems to be finally convinced that "water is made for more than one thing" (222), for in the next few paragraphs he eats as if "He might have been preparing himself for a long journey or for some action that would take all his strength," and remarks that, "it would have been no great loss if [Bishop] had drowned" (223).

[17] The narrator echoes this thought later saying, "The boy [Tarwater] was looking directly at him with an omniscient smile, faint but decided. It was a smile that Rayber had seen on his

> [Tarwater] acknowledged his uncle's presence by shifting the glint in his eyes slightly, on him and then away. The schoolteacher might have been just enough present to be ignored. Then he looked back at Bishop, triumphantly, boldly, into the very center of his eyes. (228)

Eventually, even Rayber recognizes that Tarwater's newfound ability to meet Bishop's eyes reveals Tarwater's desire to "make a slave of the child. […] Instead of avoiding him, he planned to control him, to show him who was master" (239). But Rayber fails to see that Tarwater is only acting out the philosophy he himself has been preaching all along and his hypocritical rage is self-condemning: "I will not permit that, he said. If anyone controlled Bishop, it would be himself" (239).[18]

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face before. It seemed to mock him from an ever-deepening inner knowledge that grew in indifference as it came nearer and nearer to a secret truth about him" (235).

[18] A few more examples demonstrate Rayber's abstraction, the destructive consequences of his vision, and an incoherent philosophy which is in the end ethically untenable: "Once out of sight of the boy, [Rayber] felt a pressure had been lifted from the atmosphere. He eliminated the oppressive presence from his thoughts and retained only those aspects of it that could be abstracted, clean, into the future person he envisioned" (229); "He would have with one supreme effort to resist the recognition [of Bishop]; with every nerve and muscle and thought, he would have to resist feeling anything at all, thinking anything at all. He would have to anesthetize his life" (230); "His trees stood rising above him, majestic and aloof, as if they belong to an order that had never budged from its first allegiance in the days of creation. His heart began to beat frenetically. Quickly he reduced the whole wood in probable board feet…" (232). "Casually while they ate their supper, he would lift the compulsion from his mind, expose it to the light, and let [Tarwater] have a good look at it" (233); "He waited for all the world to be turned into a burnt spot between two chimneys. All he would be was an observer. He waited with serenity. Life had never been good enough to him for him to wince at its destruction. He told himself that he was indifferent even to his own dissolution. It seemed to him that this indifference was the most that human dignity could achieve…" (241).

The great irony of this scene in which Tarwater is supposedly leading Bishop out to the lake so he can drown him, is that, given what happens later on, Bishop is actually the one in control; he is not being compelled, but is rather compelling. In a moment of rare insight (which, I think, as readers we can trust) Rayber realizes that "it was Bishop who was doing the leading, that the child had made the capture" (239). This same irony, I argue, is at the heart of the novel. On one level, Tarwater's ability to stare Bishop in the eye, even as he leads him out to his execution, actually refutes the schoolteacher's disinterested and abstracted approach to reality because Tarwater's violent act embodies the logical conclusion to Rayber's philosophy.[19] Tarwater enacts the consequences of a worldview that sees everything merely according to its use; when it is no longer useful, it can be destroyed without consequence. On another level, however, because Tarwater "*baptized* the child even as he drowned him," (243 emphasis mine), Rayber's and the stranger's philosophy is again refuted because Tarwater's sinister vision is no match for the "unspeakable mystery" which

[19] In the end, Rayber is made acutely aware of his complicity in Bishop's death. Not only does Rayber connect himself with Tarwater, "as if he had been in the water with boy and the two of them together had taken the child and held him under until he ceased to struggle," but I suggest he also, in some sense, suffers along with Bishop and thereby perhaps opens himself to being redeemed. At very least, Rayber is forced to feel something beyond the surface. When he hears Bishop's bellows, "The [hearing] machine made the sounds seem to come from inside him as if something in him were tearing itself free. He clenched his teeth. The muscles in his face contracted and revealed lines of pain beneath harder than bone" (242).

overcomes him and compels him to utter the words of baptism over Bishop. The old man's prophetic vision has clearly won the day, though Tarwater himself is not yet willing to see it—at least not yet.

Despite repeating over and over that "it wasn't nothing but words" (247-50), the reader sees that clearly Tarwater's baptismal declaration does indeed mean something, for "His eyes were open wide without the least look of sleep in them. They seemed not to be able to close but to be open forever on some sight that would never leave them" (251). Instead of feeling the satisfaction of one who "solves" a problem, he has "a still alert expression on his face as if under the closed lids an inner eye were watching, piercing out the truth in the distortion of his dream" (251). In his dream, in itself an acknowledgment of a deeper, meaningful reality, Tarwater remembers the scene out on the lake and explicitly acknowledges the two competing visions acting upon him:

> The darkness was no hindrance to his sight. He saw through it as if it were day. He looked through the blackness and saw perfectly the light silent eyes of the child across from him. They had lost their diffuseness and were trained on him, fish-colored and fixed.

At the same time, his "friend's" eyes "were violet-colored, very close and intense, and fixed on him with a peculiar look of hunger and attraction. He turned his

head away, unsettled by their attention" (251).[20] Both sets of eyes, exert a compelling force on young Tarwater, but it is telling, I think, that he must choose the stranger's vision of death for it to have any effect, while even in his refusal to baptize, Bishop's (and Mason's) vision still has its way.

When Tarwater awakes, the breaking day reveals his dream-shaken body, but "With his eyes open, his face began to look less alert. Deliberately, forcefully, he closed the inner eye that had witnessed his dream" (252). Tarwater, however, cannot successfully close this "inner eye" which has mysteriously appeared after Bishop's baptism, for when he arrives back at Powderhead, "The [sky's] glare forced him to lower his lids but on the other side of it, hidden from his daily sight but present to his inner eye that remained rigidly open, there stretched the clear gray borders of the country he had saved himself from crossing into" (254). Despite telling himself that, "He had saved himself forever from the fate he had envisioned when, […] looking into the eyes of the dim-witted child, he had seen himself trudging off into the distance in the bleeding mad shadow of Jesus, lost forever to his own inclinations" (254), Tarwater is still haunted by both the old prophet and Bishop's eyes. In fact, their presence is implicit when in another

[20] A further example highlights O'Connor's narrative technique for pairing the two: "all the time the gray eyes [Bishop's] were fixed on him as if they were waiting serenely for a struggle already determined. The violet eyes, fixed on him also, waited with a barely concealed impatience" (251).

baptism[21] of sorts, "He looked down into a gray clear pool, down and down to where two silent serene eyes were gazing at him. He tore his head away from the bucket and stumbled backwards…" (256). Clearly, Tarwater's murder of Bishop has not granted him the kind of freedom he expected, but seems rather to have bound him. When he comes across the old neighbor lady, "he could feel her eyes reeling him in […] she did not speak but only looked at him and he was obligated to direct a glance upward at her eyes" (257). And when he tries to defiantly assert his "freedom and make bold his acts," all that comes out of his mouth is an obscenity which startles even him (257).

But it is not until he himself is sodomized by the man in the lavender eyes (258)—a fully fleshed out example of the self-seeking, penetrative and abstracted kind of vision Rayber has naively touted—that Tarwater begins to truly acknowledge the incoherence of his "it's only me—nobody tells me what to do" philosophy (259). Again, the evidence for his development lies in the transformation of his eyes: after the pervert leaves, Tarwater's "eyes looked small and seedlike as if while he was asleep, they had been lifted out, scorched and dropped back into his head. His expression seemed to contract until it reached

[21] The narrator's preceding description is, I think, suggestive of a baptism: "[Tarwater] pulled off his hat and thrust his head into the water. As it touched the deeper parts of his face, a shock ran through him, as if he had never been touched by water before" (256).

some point beyond rage or pain" (261). And after symbolically burning all of his attachments to the stranger/friend/pedophile, Tarwater's eyes are finally able to accept the demands of his prophetic vocation: "His scorched eyes no longer looked hollow or as if they were meant only to guide him forward. They looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would never be used for ordinary sights again" (262). Indeed, Tarwater's next sight is extraordinary, for he realizes that Buford has graciously kept him from committing the desecrating act of burning the old prophet. A vision of his former home now burned to the ground by his own hands prepares the way:

> As he looked, his hunger constricted him anew. It appeared to be outside him, surrounding him, almost if it were visible before him, something he could reach for and not quite touch. He sensed a strangeness about the place as if there might already be an occupant. […] A deep-filled quiet pervaded everything. The encroaching dusk seemed to come softly in deference to some mystery that resided here. […] He appeared to be permanently suspended there, unable to go forward or back. (265)

But it is only when he sees the cross planted in the ground that the burden of his past is lifted from him, "as if he were dropping something he had been clutching all his life. His gaze rested finally on the ground where the wood entered the grave" (266). When he looks up, he sees, with a vision which "seemed to pierce the very air," a field

> no longer empty but peopled with a multitude. Everywhere, he saw dim figures seated on the slope and as he gazed he saw that from a single basket the throng was being fed. His eyes searched

> the crowd for a long time as if he could not find the one he was looking for. (266)

Eventually, he sees old Tarwater resting on the ground, and he realizes at last that his hunger "is the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him" (266). But he perceives his hunger no longer "as a pain but as a tide," and he knows that it rises "in a line of men whose lives were chosen to sustain it, who would wander in the world, strangers from that violent country where the silence is never broken except to shout the truth" (267). And as he watches the fire encircling him, with "his face against the dirt of the grave," the silence of that moment itself is broken with a command: "GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY." The words themselves are silent, but for the first time, Tarwater can hear them. He has finally acknowledged his allegiance with the old prophet—indeed, accepted his inability to be anything else and is therefore finally free to be himself and not a piece of information inside of anyone's head. His eyes are now ready for the difficult vocation that lies ahead of him: "His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping" (267).

The Visible Universe as a Reflection of the Invisible Universe: The Violence of a Single-Minded Respect for Truth and the Spirit Which Makes it Itself

It is no coincidence that the last words of *The Violent Bear it Away* describe Tarwater's acceptance of his prophetic calling in terms of his vision. As I have already suggested, O'Connor's letters and essays surrounding the publication of the novel overwhelmingly attest to her conviction that seeing, prophesying, and writing and reading fiction are all intimately connected. Through an extensive attention to the visual imagery in the novel, I have attempted to show how vision (Bishop's and Mason's especially, but also Rayber's failed version) not only compels Tarwater to reach that action or gesture "which indicates where the real heart of the story lies" (*MM* 111), but is in itself what Tarwater finally receives in the end. In so far that many of the assumptions of modernity are a threat to developing the particular kind of seeing which is necessary for prophesy, O'Connor's last novel can, therefore, be understood on one level as a kind of allegory about the vocation of a writer. The point of intersection between Tarwater and the writer is, of course, the kind of vision which each must develop or reject in order to fulfill their calling. It is not hard, then, to see why a writer who is facing an ever increasingly painful and debilitating battle with Lupus would write a story with such personal implications. Nevertheless, for O'Connor, "No art is sunk in the self, but rather, in art the self becomes self-forgetful in order to meet the demands of the thing seen and the thing being

made" (*MM* 81), and since she explicitly identifies herself more with Mason than with Rayber,[22] I suggest that there are even deeper levels of meaning to the novel—levels which, if the prophet's primary role as seer is to help others see, necessarily implicate the reader as well.

In her essay on the "Nature and Aim of Fiction," O'Connor, following the medieval commentators on Scripture, states that there are three kinds of meaning beyond the literal: the allegorical, the tropological, "which ha[s] to do with what should be done," and the anagogical, "which ha[s] to do with the Divine life and our participation in it" (*MM* 72). She explains that even though the method related primarily to biblical exegesis, "it was also an attitude toward all of creation, and a way of reading nature which included most possibilities" (*MM* 73). This "enlarged view" harkens again to the point I have made earlier about vision involving the writer and the prophet, but it also describes a reader who can appreciate the kind of art which has the chance of one day becoming "a permanent part of our literature." For O'Connor, intimately engaging is the most

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[22] In her letter to John Hawkes dated September 13, 1959, O'Connor says, "The modern reader will identify himself with the schoolteacher, but it is the old man who speaks for me" (350). In regards to O'Connor's statement, Bieber Lake offers a valuable qualification, though again slips, I think too easily, into an embrace of violence: "[…] in cheering for the old man O'Connor does not advocate a carte blanche acceptance of all his behavior or ideas; she only her approval of his teaching Tarwater that the prophet's call to mystery—like the writer's call to art—requires a violent commitment to the call and a violent separation from a world full of gainsayers" ("Called to the Beautiful," 295).

"reasonable" way to read, but lest this experience encourage the reader to again see the self as the end, we should remember that O'Connor writes anagogically so the reader can read anagogically, that is, in participation with the Divine life.[23] As she says, the narrative moment of all good stories which makes this possible, "would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader would make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery" (111). But this gesture is itself mysterious and is why, "The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily the educated mind, but it is at all times the kind of mind that is willing to have its sense of mystery deepened by contact with reality, and its sense of reality deepened by contact with mystery" (79). No ascetic resolution such as Rayber's, no amount of education (though it need not impede it) can instantiate this contact with mystery. It must, in a sense, come from beyond the reader and is why O'Connor uses a passive construction (here, but also throughout the novel) to say that "The [reader's] mind is led on by what it sees into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest" (*MM* 71). Even though the reader's will is involved in so far that it remains open to the

[23] Grimes' analysis of baptism in the novel is again helpful and points to the significant reader-response dimension of O'Connor's work: "If the reader reads as she wishes, revelation in the religious sense of the term occurs; that is, one experiences simultaneous judgment and grace while doing it. This is what it means to say that anagogy has to do with the divine life and our participation in it" (15).

possibility of mystery, this level of understanding usually occurs for the reader as much as for Tarwater when he is least expecting it—though often only after a painful, but healthy revelation of the self's inabilities and weaknesses.[24] The primary import of this understanding, however, is not so much that one must see more deeply (though it is that also), but is rather the final conviction that the more one honestly plumbs these depths, the deeper they become.

I suggest, then, that a reader with the right attitude toward creation and who can read nature well will have undergone a similar (if not the same) transformation of vision as Tarwater. When O'Connor suggests that "People without hope not only don't write novels, but what is more to the point, they don't read them. They don't take long looks at anything, because they lack the courage" (*MM* 78), one can instantly associate her condemnation with Rayber and the early Tarwater who out of cowardice avoid an intimacy with creation. But if a reader, like Tarwater, becomes finally persuaded of the violence of his own disinterestedness, perhaps only after its true violence is revealed when it turns on itself, then the vision of a world transfigured—of a whole multitude of

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[24] In a letter to Bernetta Quinn dated January 1960, O'Connor reveals St. Thomas Aquinas as the source for much of her thinking on prophecy and emphasizes its somewhat extrinsic origination: "He says prophecy depends on the imaginative and not the moral faculty. It's a matter of seeing. Those who, like Tarwater, see, will see what they have no desire to see and the vision will be the purifying fire" (Quinn 167).

people sharing in a feast which never ceases to multiply—becomes a genuine possibility.[25]

This, I argue, is one way to understand the moral or tropological dimension of the novel. By paying attention to the kind of development occurring in the characters, the reader, by implication, is also forced to question the limitations of his or her own philosophical framework and can see the eventual self-destructiveness of a vision which seeks to penetrate the object in order to subject it to its own purposes. In this regard, it seems clear that O'Connor does indeed hope "to precipitate an act of reading that is itself a kind of *imitatio Christi*." Rather than violating the object by superficially defining, perhaps confining, it according to use or a merely symbolic function, O'Connor immerses the reader in an experience which constantly demands that he or she pay closer attention and begin to see that in life as much as in books, "more always happens than we are able to take in at once, more happens than meets the eye" (*MM* 71). As Bieber Lake rightly notes,

> O'Connor has fulfilled her prescription for a novel, […] without resorting to the sentimentality that would cheapen the story's central action. Ultimately the conflation of the murder—with its association of violence and struggle for the prophet, and the

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[25] Similarly, Bieber Lake notes that, "In O'Connor's theory of art, Rayber's love for Bishop is the same love that will result in the reader if the artist properly renders the beautiful. Rayber's loves scares him because it puts him in danger of coming outside of himself and into a spiritual relationship with God and creation" (303).

> baptism—with its association of ineffable mystery, compounds the metaphorical depth of the scene that in O'Connor's aesthetics lends the entire work its beauty. ("Called" 310)

And yet, it is precisely at this point which, at least from a theologically impoverished conception of beauty, one might accuse O'Connor of perpetrating a kind of violence both against her art and her readers. Indeed, Bieber Lake herself opens this possibility, despite an otherwise extraordinary analysis of the beautiful as a compelling dimension of O'Connor's work. Noting the same parallels I am arguing for between Tarwater's journey and the reader's, she explains,

> Because of the strange conflation of violence with the sacramental rite, the reader replays the scene as well; to make sense of the story, the reader's vision must operate anagogically, too; and so now has *O'Connor tricked the reader* into sharing Tarwater's participation in the depth of mystery. Tarwater baptizes Bishop in spite of himself, and we see the mystery operate in spite of ourselves. ("Called" 311 emphasis mine)

Despite the many ways my own reading of O'Connor echoes and profits from Bieber Lake's, it is crucial for all the reasons I offered in preceding chapters that we reject a notion, even the suggestion, that the beautiful operates by way of "trickery." It seems clear that something inexplicable and mysterious "compels" both Rayber and Tarwater throughout the novel, but we ourselves commit a kind of violence if we can only conceive of that compulsion as completely working against or "in spite of" the self. What a deeply Trinitarian conception of beauty

allows for rather, is the confidence that beauty in fact unmasks all the intellectual or rhetorical forms of trickery in the very act of cultivating with a desire for the beautiful.

As we have seen (and Bieber Lake herself demonstrates) O'Connor herself knew full well how quickly a didactic moralism would become a violation of her craft and her audience. But O'Connor also knew, better than most, that a complete disinterestedness and feigned objectivity could be just as deadly—which is why Maritain's injunction to work solely for "the good of that which is made" was so artistically freeing for her. Via Maritain, O'Connor came to understand more fully Thomas Aquinas's definition of art as "reason in making." O'Connor considered this a "very cold" and yet "very beautiful" way of speaking about art, because it suggested that

> The artist uses his reason to discover an answering reason in everything he sees. For him, to be reasonable is to find, in the object, in the situation, in the sequence, the spirit which makes it itself. This is not an easy or simple thing to do. It is to intrude upon the timeless, and that is only done by the violence of a single-minded respect for the truth. (*MM* 81)

Unlike the young, aspiring Christian novelist who might write a "positive novel based on the Church's fight for social justice," (*MM* 195) or John Hawkes' artist who, much like Rayber, tells himself "that there is nothing else in the world except what he creates" (qtd in Yarborough 17), O'Connor knew that her primary task as an artist and as a Christian was to discover in everything she

saw, "the spirit which makes it itself." In the very act of doing so, not only would she be rendering "the highest justice to the visible universe" as a "reflection of the invisible universe" (*HB* 129), she and her readers, would be "intruding upon the timeless."

And such a move, I have argued in light of David Hart, is precisely the motion of beauty. For the "violence," if it can even be called that, of such a "single-minded respect" for the particular truth of being does not come at the *cost* of true personhood, but rather for the *sake* of it. If indeed this is a "violence," it is not the kind which leads to Bishop's murder, but rather that which leads to his baptism. For it is only then that Tarwater admits the full truth about Bishop: his rightful naming as one made in the image of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and his true participation in the life of the one about whom it was said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). For O'Connor, as for Hart, to make such a declaration is to discover precisely that "answering reason" which rejects the violence of Rayber's rationalist impulse to view the other as a signifying "x". Thus, *pace* Sonnenfeld, Rayber's failure is not his refusal to *enact* violence, but rather his refusal to *acknowledge*the violence he inflicts on himself and others as he insists on establishing himself as the center, the sole arbiter of reality. "True freedom," says Sykes, "lies in the power to envision the good and move toward it. False freedom is the self-governing autonomy that serves as the

modern, Enlightenement-inspired model of a moral man" (63). Thus, for Sykes, the "ultimate act of 'freedom,'" Tarwater's drowning of Bishop, "is at once radical and self-defeating. […] For the will, torn from its orientation to God and thus from the good, is no longer fully free. Its true freedom paradoxically appears as compulsion—the divine grace of desire for God" (67).

Similarly, the revelation Tarwater receives after being violated by the man in lavender, speaks ultimately not to the necessity of an "authorized" violence, but rather a direct rejection of it. Critics have often been quick to note O'Connor's famous, if somewhat misleading statement that "Violence is a force which can be used for good or evil," but have often conveniently neglected her statement immediately following that "the man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him"(*MM* 113-14). Or, as O'Connor says elsewhere, "It is the violation that brings home to Tarwater the real nature of his rejection" (*HB* 368).[26] Thus, Gary Ciuba is right to remind us that violence in

[26] This explanation is crucial to interpreting O'Connor's admission immediately following: "I couldn't have brought off the final vision without it." Despite suggesting the *necessity* of violence for vision, I take O'Connor to be saying nevertheless that the only way she could really flesh out Tarwater's rejection of beauty, was to include the scene in the woods. Gary Ciuba's assessment here is quite helpful: "If O'Connor's characters receive grace, it is not through being borne away by violence but in their responding to violence. Grace cannot be forced upon a recipient by assault, for as O'Connor recognized, it is offered as a moment that can always be accepted or refused (*MM* 118). Tarwater rejects violence not because he is violated but because he feels that violence as not sacred, not graced, not the embrace of God" (159).

O'Connor is not "inherently salvific" but rather provides "an opportunity to clarify what is most fundamental to the self" (159). For what Tarwater discovers in heeding the stranger's suggestions is not the freedom he was promised but only the worst kind of coercion and the very violence he has glorified throughout the novel (Ciuba 158). As Sykes argues in his insistence that evil must be understood as a privation of good, the devil/stranger is in fact ultimately "bent on nothingness." Such a "bent" is gruesomely embodied in the very negation of Tarwater's will:

> […] he is literally used against his will in the most intimate of ways. […] Having initially gained Tarwater's cooperation, he incapacitates his will entirely, rending him a volitionless object of pleasure. […] Just as Tarwater's rebelliousness issues in a violent act of his own hands, so does his seduction into evil culminate with his own physical violation. (68-9)

Tarwater may indeed be auto-*nomos*, a law unto himself, but if so, it is the same law by which the demons in Milton's hell attempt to quench their ever-increasing thirst through apples which turn to ashes (*Paradise Lost* 10.540-577).

Conversely, what he finds as he is "compelled" by his blood-ties to the old prophet and the gift of Bishop's mere presence is the true freedom to be himself. Maritain's description of the intrinsic delightfulness of beauty is useful here as it points to the paradox of a self brought to fullness:

> The beautiful is essentially delightful. This is why, of its very nature and precisely as beautiful, it stirs desire and produces love. […] Love in its turn produces ecstasy, that is to say, it puts the lover

> outside himself; ec-stasy, of which the soul experiences a diminished form when it is seized by the beauty of the work of art, and the fullness when it is absorbed, like the dew, by the beauty of God. (26–27)

In the same way that the desire beauty cultivates for itself (through its "suasive loveliness") leads to a vision of the self as intrinsically a recipient of God's delight, it is only when Tarwater finally recognizes the failure of his many attempts to satisfy his hunger, that he find himself, his true self, gathered with a whole multitude of people at a feast where the gifts never cease to multiply.

And this, this out-of-self experience which nonetheless bestows upon the observer a greater fullness of being, is perhaps the best image of not only what it means to read anagogically, but what it might look like to read as an *imitatio Christi.* In the same way that Tarwater finds true freedom and vision by submitting to the peaceful compulsion of beauty rather than the self-annihilating, deafening coercion of the stranger's nothingness, a reader who reads anagogically will know that the moral or tropological dimension is not something superadded or merely accidental to the anagogical, but is rather inextricably linked as both a propaedeutic and a consequence of a vision made able to "intrude upon the timeless" in the very process of recognizing "an answering reason" in everything that he sees. Candler reminds us that such a vision

> does not efface particularity; on the contrary, in the Jewish flesh of Jesus (which typology helps to elucidate but does not dissolve) the old is made new but not different. The new creation, which is the referent of anagogy, is not annihilation but an elevation; as O'Connor knew so well, grace does not destroy but perfects and elevates nature. (25)

Thus, in the same way that the anagogical elevates the literal and moral level of the text without destroying it, a vision of the beautiful, within a proper theological aesthetics, transfigures the vision of the apprehender. Indeed, as Candler says, this is "the paradox of anagogical vision: we can only be seen in *our own right* when we are seen *sub specie aeternitatis*" (25). To which we might simply add this further paradox: to read as an *imitatio Christi*, is above all to be *read by* Christ. "For," as David Hart suggests:

> it is Christ who thematizes the other as infinite, who reorders the surface of being according to a beauty that allows every other to be seen no longer within the enclosure of totality, but as the very glory of God; it is Christ who at once disrupts the hierarchy of representations belong to a world conceived as power and instates, in himself another order of seeing, a motion of the beautiful that goes even into the abyss as form and light. (*The Beauty* 343)

Indeed, in doing what it suggests, in fleshing out its own implications for its readers, in showing us rather than telling us, in teaching us to read even as we read it, in pointing to an ever-deepening mystery even as we begin to comprehend it, in participating the motion of the beautiful, O'Connor's art reorders the surface of our being and instates an other order of seeing. But she does so, not primarily to plunge us into an abyss, but rather to shed some light in

the abyss of our own making. Fortunately for us, if we are to see and experience this call to go beyond our typical way of seeing things—indeed if we are to learn anything about O'Connor's work and proceed to discuss it in any significant way—we must, along with O'Connor, first realize that these problems "will never be solved by the will" and that if we are "able to do anything about it, it must simply be given" (*HB* 116). Unfortunately for our egos, however, if, as O'Connor knew, "judgment is implicit in the act of seeing," (*MM* 130) then truly paying attention to what O'Connor is up to means that we might risk seeing ourselves in a very different, probably less flattering way. Nevertheless, if we learn nothing else from O'Connor, we should at least see that no amount of running will distance us from this terrible grace and that we must sooner or later face it if we are to see as she does.

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