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# Sacramental Imagery in the Fiction of James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Wendell Berry

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**Sacramental Imagery in the Fiction of  
James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and  
Wendell Berry**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Liberal Studies*

*by*

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*May 2018*

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## Abstract

### Sacramental Imagery in the Fiction of James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Wendell Berry

Alienation, nihilism, disenchantment, and destruction of the Earth are some of the widespread maladies of modernity and post-modernity. Dualisms between body and soul, the physical and spiritual, nature and grace, and fact and value have separated humans from other people, from the Earth, from the divine, and ultimately from themselves. Ambivalence about embodiment has characterized Western Civilization since at least the time of Plato and early Christianity. Over time, a confluence of powerful philosophical, religious, and scientific ideas and movements deepened the fissures of these destructive dualisms. Modern science with its claims to hegemony over objective ways of knowing the world is not capable of addressing the issues that are of most importance to human beings—questions about meaning, purpose, and values. Traditional forms of meaning making like narrative, metaphor, art, religion, and ritual were relegated to the realm of subjectivism and regarded as subservient to scientism. By contrast, the sacramental imagination that typified the pre-modern and early modern worldview saw connections everywhere between God, humankind, and the cosmos. The sacramental imagination sees the material and the spiritual as being intimately intertwined in the warp and woof of reality. This thesis begins by tracing the genesis of the body-soul dualism in the West and how the sacramental tapestry was woven and then torn asunder. On the darkling plain of modernity there arose three poet-prophets to call humanity back to a holistic and embodied way of engaging the world: James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Wendell Berry. Although they represent secular, Catholic, and Protestant viewpoints, respectively, they each demonstrate how to recover the sacramental imagination. This thesis enters into

the critical conversation concerning the sacramental nature of their works, including comparing and contrasting their sacramental approach. Through a close reading of one work of fiction from each author (Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, O'Connor's short story "Parker's Back, and Berry's novel *Remembering*), their use of sacramental imagery and the functioning of their fictional works as sacramental texts is explored. Recovery of the sacramental imagination is put forth as a way to embrace embodiment and to regain connections between humans, the world, and the transcendent.

## Acknowledgements

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To all the faculty of Rollins College who taught classes I took in the Master of Liberal Studies (MLS), I owe a deep debt of gratitude for enriching my life with a liberal arts education that I will always treasure. My MLS classmates enhanced my delight.

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Lastly, I want to thank God who delights in creating embodied souls. My desire to recover a sacramental imagination is ultimately a desire to know Him better.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Please do not be fooled by the title. This is not a thesis about a quaint literary trope. Instead, it seeks to address something that lies right at the heart of being human—relationships with other people, with the Earth, with the transcendent, and ultimately with ourselves. Modernity and post-modernity are fraught with dualisms: body/soul, physical/spiritual, nature/grace, fact/value, secular/sacred, etc. Prior to the advent of modernity, Western Civilization had several shared moorings that anchored people to the world and one another. Common connections to God, family, friends, place, and nature permeated society and provided a glue that helped unite people to others and to themselves. In the wake of the storm of modernity, these bonds largely disintegrated, leaving people cast adrift as so much flotsam and jetsam in the shipwreck of a once stable society.

Individuals were seeking to regain their bearings while drifting and being buffeted by waves of life with no firm foundation to grab onto. In Virginia Woolf's novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, the narrator captures the protagonist Clarissa Dalloway's thoughts as she contemplates a young man suffering from shell shock who committed suicide just before her big party: "people feeling the impossibility of reaching the centre which, mystically, evaded them; closeness drew apart; rapture faded, one was alone. There was an embrace in death" (180). This brief quote captures the alienation, nihilism, and disenchantment pervading the modern psyche.

From at least the time of Plato and Aristotle and early Christianity, a belief in gods or a God undergirded the prevailing sense of purpose and connection in the pre-

modern and early-modern Western world. As Lawrence Principe notes in *The Scientific Revolution: A Very Short Introduction*, “When early modern thinkers looked out on the world, they saw a *cosmos* in the true Greek sense of that word, that is, a well-ordered and arranged whole. They saw the various components of the physical universe tightly interwoven with one another, and joined intimately to human beings and to God” (21). Early moderns, including natural philosophers, saw the cosmos as an interconnected and purposeful whole. In his poem, “The Second Coming,” which was written in the aftermath of World War I, William Butler Yeats (1865-1939) laments that “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold.” Rather than a connected cosmos, everything was simply coming apart. Modern scientific approaches “produced a disjointed, fragmented world that can leave human beings feeling alienated and orphaned from the universe” (Principe 21). Like Woolf, most of the great modern authors captured the maladies of modernity. However, elucidating the problem was one thing, offering a solution was quite another.

A few poet-prophets arose to call people back to a different way of seeing the world, an older way. Among them were James Joyce (1882-1941), Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964), and Wendell Berry (1934-). What they suggest to pull things back together again is the recovery of the sacramental imagination. The sacramental imagination sees the transcendent intimately connected to the material world in such a way that they reveal one another. I have chosen to focus on sacramental imagery in the works of these authors in order to represent three different viewpoints: one secular (Joyce), one Catholic (O’Connor), and one Protestant (Berry). By comparing and contrasting their sacramental approach, my goal is to gain a fuller understanding of how the sacramental imagination functions in literature and in life. This kind of approach is so important because it is



critical to helping people connect with one another, to the Earth, to the divine, and ultimately to themselves.

In order to more fully appreciate how these authors employed sacramental imagery in their fiction and to what end, I think it is important to first set the backdrop in two ways. Although there are many dualisms in modernity and post-modernity as noted above, the most fundamental duality for humans is the one between body and soul. Western philosophers from at least the time of Plato and Christianity from its inception have struggled with ambivalence in the relationship between body and soul, which has as its corollary the relationship between the physical and the spiritual. This is a very large issue, but I have attempted to capture some sense of the genesis and trajectory of body-soul dualism in Western Civilization beginning with Plato and extending into modernity. As I will seek to demonstrate, the body-soul dualism has roots that are philosophical, religious, and scientific in nature. This potent combination of advocacy in separating body and soul was indeed formidable with support from the Enlightenment project, the Reformation, and modern science.

The antithesis of body-soul and physical-material dualisms is the sacramental imagination. Again, this is a large topic that must be traced all the way back to early Christianity. It has two parts, the weaving of the sacramental tapestry and how it was eventually ripped asunder. In Chapter 3, I seek to explain what the sacramental imagination is and give some sense of how it might be recovered. Even if a broad recovery of the sacramental imagination seems unlikely at this point within Western society, I believe that individuals and churches are certainly capable of moving in that direction in a way that will enrich their own lives, the lives of others they touch, and the

places on Earth where they dwell. The body-soul dualism is so prevalent that it is the air we breathe without really thinking about it much. I am hopeful that those who begin to see it for what it is will reject it in favor of a much healthier alternative.

What most people fail to understand is that a sacramental apprehension of the world was once the norm in the West. In “The Sacramental Text Reconsidered,” Sarah Beckwith indicates: “The very concept of religion—as separate from, say, politics, the economy, and even science—is a relatively recent development which has been back-projected on histories to which such a concept is alien” (535). Beckwith sees the separation of religion from the rest of life (i.e., the secularization thesis) as coming into being as a result of new concepts of the state and sovereignty [e.g., Jean Bodin (1529-1596) and John Locke (1632-1704)] along with sixteenth and seventeenth century Protestant polemics that considered ritual as “empty or theatrical” (535). Thus, the sharp division of aspects of human existence into either sacred or secular categories has its origins in both Enlightenment rationalism and the Reformation’s reformulation of the meaning of the sacraments. Even though the research of sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and his successors demonstrates the significance of religious and secular rituals, they are still underappreciated in terms of their power to form and shape communities and individuals. If sacraments and rituals are underappreciated in the majority of Protestant churches, how much more so in society in general.

Beckwith indicates that the secularization thesis covers certain interconnected ideas from the Enlightenment and the Reformation, including the privatization of religion, the differentiation of religion from other spheres of life, and an assumption of the decline of religious belief. “From this perspective the claim that certain texts are

sacramental is an attempt to re-enchant word and world, to see the sacred in the immanent, or to see particular words as efficaciously transforming their recipients, and it thus both supports<sup>1</sup> and resists the secularization thesis” (Beckwith 535). This is an excellent summary of what sacramental texts do. They seek to militate against the disenchantment of modernity and post-modernity that is so closely aligned with scientific materialism. In *The Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note that “The myth of objectivism has dominated Western culture, and in particular Western philosophy, from the Presocratics to the present day” (195). Both the rationalist and empiricist traditions have thrived under this myth, which has led to the assumption that science is the preeminent means of accessing objective knowledge.

Science is extraordinarily useful to humankind, but unable to answer the questions humans care most about—questions of meaning and purpose. “With the rise of empirical science as a model for truth, the suspicion of poetry and rhetoric became dominant in Western thought, with metaphor and other figurative devices becoming objects of scorn once again. [Thomas] Hobbes, for example, finds metaphors absurd and misleadingly emotional” (Lakoff and Johnson 190). Scientism is not only disenchanting, it is also dehumanizing. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, the Romantic poets, artists, and philosophers reacted against this alienation of humans from nature and their own natures. “Science, reason, and technology had alienated man from himself and his natural environment, or so the Romantics alleged; they saw poetry, art, and a return to nature as a way for man to recover his lost humanity” (Lakoff and Johnson 192). While the

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<sup>1</sup> Beckwith notes that some writers in the field of “sacramental poetics” make claims that the secularization thesis “about God leaving the world” is supported by the change from Catholic immanentism (Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist throughout Christendom) to a “so-called Protestant semiotics of representation rather than presence” (with Zwinglianism representing the Eucharist as mere symbol) [535].

Romantics' negative reaction was in one sense understandable, by ceding the ground of rationality to the empiricists, they chose the myth of subjectivity over the myth of objectivity.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that “By giving up on rationality, the Romantics played into the hands of the myth of objectivism, whose power has continued to increase ever since . . . In terms of real power in our society . . . the myth of objectivism reigns supreme” (192). Subjectivism retains a niche in art and religion, but it is subjugated to the realm of feelings and imagination—not considered a true purveyor of truth. Thus, the genesis of the fact versus value distinction. However, Lakoff and Johnson point to a third way: an experientialist synthesis. They note that “The reason we have focused so much on metaphor is that it unites reason and imagination . . . Metaphor is thus *imaginative rationality* . . . Metaphor is one of our most important tools for trying to comprehend partially what cannot be comprehended totally: our feelings, aesthetic experiences, moral practices, and spiritual awareness” (192-3). Humans do not live by scientifically observable facts alone, but primarily by coherent narratives that are replete with metaphors that connect us to other humans, to the world, and to the transcendent. This is not anti-rational, it is suprarational, which is the only way to account for life in all its fullness and mystery.

How does the preceding discussion relate to rituals in general and sacraments in particular? By nature, humans are ritualistic. Rituals are repeated, structured practices that help organize and give meaning to our lives. As Lakoff and Johnson indicate: “Each ritual is a repeated, coherently structured, and unified aspect of our experience. In performing them, we give structure and significance to our activities, minimizing chaos

and disparity in our actions . . . ritual is one kind of experiential gestalt” (233-4). Because rituals are so prevalent, we can tend to take them for granted. They tend to be more noticeable as they are performed together with other people (e.g., singing the national anthem before sporting contests). They become even more noticeable when our deepest aspirations are clearly associated with them. According to Lakoff and Johnson, “Religious rituals are typically metaphorical kinds of activities, which usually involve metonymies—real-world objects standing for entities in the world as defined by the conceptual system of the religion. The coherent structure of the ritual is commonly taken as paralleling some aspect of reality as it is seen through the religion” (234). Religious rituals help people to relate to the divine, the world, and other people through a metanarrative or gestalt that is full of metaphors. They are designed to synthetically engage the rational, imaginative, and sensual aspects of our humanity to produce meaning and coherence.

Sacraments are forms of religious ritual that are considered of heightened significance based on the potential for meaning-making that they contain. As an example, for a Catholic, lighting votary candles may be full of metaphorical meaning, but would pale in significance compared to the Eucharist. Lakoff and Johnson note that “Just as we seek out metaphors to highlight and make coherent what we have in common with someone else, so we seek out *personal* metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes, and goals as well” (232-3). Sacraments are fraught with personal and communal significance because the metaphors encapsulated within them deal with our past, present, and hopes for the future all at the same time. This is both personal and communal because what is signified and

experienced encapsulates both our unique individual story and the larger shared story of all humanity and its relationship with God. Sacraments represent a microcosm of the metanarrative of human history—Fall, Redemption, and future Glorification.

After considering the problem of body-soul dualism and offering recovery of the sacramental imagination as a potential solution, I will turn to the three modern poet-prophets I have selected to illustrate how the sacramental imagination might be recovered through the models supplied in their fiction. Two chapters are devoted to each author. The first of each pair of chapters will begin by evaluating the author's spirituality to get some sense of the perspective from which their sacramental imagination springs. Here, I rely on what they have said about themselves and their fiction as well as what biographers and critics have noted about them. In these introductory chapters for each author, I also seek to give some sense of how the authors and various critics have perceived the sacramental character of their work, to engage in the scholarly conversation, and to synthesize the key aspects of their unique approach to sacramentality.

Although I impose a structure on the introductory chapters, I am seeking to go where the critical conversation has led. References to specific examples of the authors' works that illustrate their sacramental approach are alluded to and include the thought of various critics, as well as my own. The amount of critical material available on the sacramental nature of each author's fiction varies significantly. As might be expected, much more has been written about O'Connor's sacramental approach than has been written about Joyce's or Berry's. I have not sought to provide even treatment for each author, but instead to reflect to some extent the amount of critical conversation and the

amount of material available concerning what they have said about the sacramental nature of their own works.

My overarching goal in the introductory chapters is to provide an overview of the characteristics of each artist's sacramental imagination with sufficient examples from their fiction to illustrate their literary approach to sacramental imagery. It is important to see each author's works as not only using sacramental imagery, but also being sacramental texts in their totality. That is, the texts themselves function sacramentally as one enters into them; they can serve as conduits of grace that use the material to connect to the transcendent. In some of her works of fiction, O'Connor, as a Roman Catholic author, enters into an authorial dialogue with Joyce, a lapsed Catholic. This provides a unique opportunity to compare and contrast their sacramental approaches, which I have tried to cover in the introductory chapter on O'Connor.

The second chapter for each author represents a detailed close reading of one of their works of fiction. For this purpose, I selected Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, O'Connor's short story "Parker's Back," and Berry's novel *Remembering*. The criteria I used for selection of one work to represent each author were as follows: a clear and extensive representation of sacramental imagery; sufficient critical commentary and/or related inter-textual material available to enter into the conversation and interact with; and my ability to bring something significantly unique to the critical conversation. My goal for the close reading chapters is to more fully elucidate the author's sacramental approach that was more generally discussed in the introductory chapters, to deepen and widen the critical conversation, to illustrate how to read the texts sacramentally, and to show how

the protagonists' recovery of a sacramental imagination in some way may model an approach for reconnecting with other people, the Earth, the divine, and oneself.

Where does my particular approach to the sacramentality of each author's work and the nature of sacramental imagery in general fit into the larger critical conversation? The most detailed exposition I found of sacramental imagery in Joyce's work was Kevin Farrell's article "The Reverent Stephen Dedalus, S.J., Sacramental Structure in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*." I seek to draw out additional sacramental imagery in *Portrait* using Farrell's work as a starting point. Since Stephen is a protagonist in both *Portrait* and *Ulysses*, I believe my close reading of *Ulysses* serves as a fitting complement to Farrell's work and covers new ground. Whereas, the majority of *Portrait* deals with Stephen's life as a Catholic student being educated by Jesuits, *Ulysses* shows the transition of his sacramentally-formed imagination into a secular sphere through his co-protagonist, Leopold Bloom. I believe this is my primary contribution in terms of evaluating Joyce's sacramental imagination.

In "What the Thunder Said: A Portrait of the Artist as a Trans-Secular Event," Jack Dudley provides insight on how "Joyce's use of epiphany reworked Catholic concepts of transcendence and immanence, amid the contentious theological debates of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to craft a modernist religious experience, one directed at achieving spiritual meaning" (457). Dudley argues that Joyce's fictions cannot be easily classified as either secular or religious, but trans-secular. Because the epiphanies Joyce's characters experience are typically mediated by some apparently insignificant object or event, his concept of epiphany links closely to a sacramental imagination. As Dudley indicates, "Joyce's works offer all the opportunity, in literary form, to perceive in material moments



the eternal to break into the everyday” (470). In *Flannery O’Connor’s Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference*, Carol Shloss provides a helpful comparison between Joyce’s epiphanies and those of O’Connor. In my close reading of “Parker’s Back,” I seek to demonstrate the importance of O’Connor’s approach to epiphany as what Shloss terms “a divine movement-human response pattern” (107) as opposed to Joyce’s emphasis on man’s mind and imagination searching out and finding the transcendent.

Donovan Schaefer’s article “Heavenbeast” was most helpful in pointing out that Joyce’s *Ulysses* can be seen as following the elements of Menippean satire as summarized by Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975). Schaefer indicates that “For Bakhtin, this genre ‘is opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world; it makes no pretense to renunciation of the earthly, or independence of the earth and the body’” (130). This highlights Joyce’s rejection of body-soul dualism and disconnecting the physical from the transcendent. I disagree with Schaefer’s interpretation of Joyce’s use of Menippean satire. He argues that “menippean satire is not oriented towards epiphanies that link the characters of the book to transcendence” (130). By contrast, I think Joyce breaks down sacred/secular distinctions in order to demonstrate that the mundane is the means to reach the transcendent through epiphany, as noted above. To me this approach is more consistent with Bakhtin’s analysis in *The Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Bakhtin’s summary of grotesque realism in *The Bakhtin Reader* is also quite helpful when considering Joyce’s approach. I did not find much literary criticism to assist in my close reading of *Ulysses* from a sacramental perspective.

Much more has been written about Flannery O’Connor’s sacramental approach. In fact, the amount of books and articles consulted for this thesis on that topic,

specifically, or related topics is quite voluminous. First of all, I tried to delve deeply into what Flannery O'Connor had to say about her own sacramental approach and against its antithesis, modern Manichaeism. Her letters compiled in *Habit of Being* and her *Collected Works*, and her occasional prose compiled in *Mystery and Manners* provided many helpful insights.

Susan Srigley's *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art* represents one of the more comprehensive attempts to evaluate the sacramental character of O'Connor's works. Srigley begins by drawing on *Mystery and Manners* to elucidate O'Connor's sacramental theology and incarnational art and then provides a detailed treatment of her two novels, *Wise Blood* and *The Violent Bear it Away*, and her short story, "Revelation." Srigley argues that what O'Connor strives to show through her sacramental theology, incarnational aesthetics, and prophetic vision is that "reality is morally ordered by love and that the response to love is the moral basis of all action" (54). Srigley's stated aim is to "elucidate O'Connor's sacramental vision with reference to her theological and philosophical sources and to show how this sacramental vision is embodied within her fiction as an ethic of responsibility" (2). Thus, Srigley's focus is the ethical implications of O'Connor's sacramental view.

Because O'Connor's sacramental vision really undergirds everything she was doing as a writer, there are many connections that can be made. Examples of book-length treatments on various topics of relevance include the following: love (Richard Giannone's *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*), grace (Lorine Getz's *Nature and Grace in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction*), the grotesque (Gilbert Muller's *Nightmares and Visions: Flannery O'Connor and the Catholic Grotesque*), comic vision (Ralph

Wood's *The Comedy of Redemption*), Christian humanism (Daniel Eggenschwiler's *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O'Connor*), monologic versus dialogic narrative (Robert Brinkmeyer, Jr.'s *The Art and Vision of Flannery O'Connor*), and thematic tendencies (Carter Martin's *The True Country*).

One of the sources I found most helpful was Chapter 6, "The Prophetic Imagination," in Frederick Asals's *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*. Asals demonstrates how O'Connor's prophetic imagination makes use of the ascetic, the grotesque, violence, death, and comedy to prepare her protagonists for a sacramental way of seeing the world. I have found Ralph Wood to be one of the most perceptive critics regarding O'Connor's work and his *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* was very helpful in considering how "O'Connor's insistence on a radically unapologetic gospel as it is mediated by a no less radical sacramentalism" also represents a strong critique of Southern antisacramentalism (3). The number of articles on sacramental or related themes in O'Connor's work are too numerous to cite here.

Many articles have been written about "Parker's Back." The diversity of approaches to O'Connor's last work are impressive. Religious readings have focused on topics such as: sacraments, signs, symbols, icons, law versus grace, pilgrimage, prophecy, biblical allusions, Christian evolutionary theory, and post-modern theology. Non-religious critiques have included psychological, racial, and feminist approaches and an argument that the story is a critique of Enlightenment rationalism. My approach is clearly situated within a religious context that takes seriously what O'Connor has said about her sacramental approach. Based on my research, I would characterize most sacramental approaches to "Parker's Back" as seeing the story in a more general sacramental way. I

have tried to distinguish my approach from that of others by a more literal reading of allusions to the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church in the story. I have also tried to more clearly show how “Parker’s Back” represents one of O’Connor’s most sustained critiques of gnostic forms of Christianity that she saw as so prevalent in the largely Protestant South and how other works like *The Violent Bear it Away* represent a critique of Enlightenment rationalism. I also seek to provide a detailed treatment of epiphanies in “Parker’s Back” in a way that connects to her sacramental approach.

In comparison to O’Connor, much less has been written by critics about Berry’s sacramentalism. Two of the articles I found most helpful were Hans Gustafson’s “Sacramental Spirituality in the Brothers Karamazov and Wendell Berry’s Port William Characters” and Jason Peters’s “Wendell Berry’s Vindication of the Flesh.” Gustafson unpacks Berry’s pansacramental vision. He notes that “Wendell Berry’s 21<sup>st</sup>-century American fiction is imbued with an inherent sacramentalism that yields a similar anti-dualistic sacramental spirituality . . . Readers of Berry’s works know well his distaste for the dualistic, Gnostic, and ‘other-worldly’ tendencies that have crept into modern American Protestantism” (356). While O’Connor critiques the anti-sacramental and gnostic character of American Protestantism from the outside as a Catholic, Berry provides his own critique from the inside, or the margins as he might put it.

Peters provides a helpful summary of Berry’s opposition to dualisms of spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, and of body and soul. Such dualisms are antithetical to a sacramental imagination. Roger Lundin picks up on this theme in “The Poetics of Marriage and Embodiment” where he notes the connections that Berry makes between marriage, household, and the Earth in *The*

*Odyssey*. Lundin considers the celebration of the “geographical and moral” structure of a poem as part of Berry’s poetics of embodiment.

Of the three authors I am considering, Berry wrote the most poetry. In “‘Close Mystery’: Wendell Berry’s Poetry of Incarnation,” John Lang compares O’Connor’s and Berry’s approaches as follows: “whereas O’Connor’s fiction has focused on what she calls ‘mystery as it is incarnated in human life,’ Berry’s poetry has centered upon the mystery incarnate in nonhuman life . . . Yet in Berry’s writing, as in O’Connor’s, the author’s intent is to disclose to the reader a world infused with grace” (258-9). Laird Christensen also addresses the sacramental nature of Berry’s poetry in “Spirit Astir in the World: Wendell Berry’s Sacramental Poetry.” As he notes, “Berry’s poetry urges us to imagine a world in which divinity is manifest in all aspects of the earth community” (165). Berry indicated that poetry was his most personal medium. As Christensen and Lang reveal, Berry’s nature poetry demonstrates how to receive the world sacramentally. Using some of Berry’s poems dealing with nature, I seek to show how he models the sacramental imagination and how reading and contemplating his poetry can assist in developing a similar mindfulness.

Like O’Connor, Berry has written much in the way of non-fiction that demonstrates what he thought about the problems of dualisms that pit the body against the soul. Yet, whereas most of what we have from O’Connor focuses on the writing of fiction, Berry as poet, philosopher, prophet, and farmer provides a much broader treatment of the damage done by the loss of the sacramental imagination. For Berry, the sacramental imagination must be rooted in community and place. I seek to explore a number of Berry’s essays and interviews with him in a quest to understand more about

the essence of the sacramental imagination and why it is so important to every facet of life. *Wendell Berry and the Given Life* by Ragan Sutterfield provides an excellent summary of key themes in Berry's work, including a chapter on "The Body and the Earth." *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, edited by Mark Mitchell and Nathan Schlueter, consists of a series of essays that also cover key themes in Berry's work. Because no book-length treatment of Berry's sacramental imagination is available, I have sought to synthesize a wide variety of sources in an effort to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this aspect of his work. In addition, some comparison and contrast with O'Connor's and Joyce's sacramental approach is provided in the Conclusion.

With regard to his novel *Remembering*, the most extensive treatment I found linking that work to his sacramental imagination is in "Sexuality and the Sacramental Imagination: It All Turns on Affection" by P. Travis Kroeker. Kroeker provides a helpful summary of Berry's sacramental imagination, which he argues informs Berry's artistic and cultural vision. He shows how the sacramental imagination is revived in the life of Berry's protagonist, Andy Catlett, as he reflects on *Remembering*. For Andy, the community of which he is a member, and society at large, the sacrament of marriage is foundational. Kroeker encapsulates how Andy's recovery of the sacramental imagination is a pilgrimage and an odyssey back to himself and all he holds dear—all that has held him ever since he was born. I have sought to expand beyond Kroeker in my own close reading of *Remembering*. Gustafson makes reference to *Remembering* as an example of sacramentalism in Berry, but he does not give a detailed treatment.

In the concluding chapter, I seek to compare and contrast the sacramental approaches of each of the authors in an effort to more fully elucidate the nature of the sacramental imagination and how it is influenced by differing theological and philosophical perspectives. In so doing, I hope to enrich the scholarship on sacramental imagery and to do so in a way that is accessible, meaningful, and directly applicable to readers with either a secular or religious viewpoint. In the final chapter, I offer some of the implications of how what I have gleaned from this research project might be expanded and applied to other authors. In addition, I hint at the practical implications for building community, uniting people in their common humanity, resisting scientism, regaining meaning, and caring for the Earth and all its creatures. In essence, I am proposing a potential remedy for the alienation, nihilism, and destruction of the Earth that pervades the spirit of modernity and post-modernity. As I stated from the outset, this thesis is far more than the analysis of a particular literary device with religious overtones; it deals with a topic that impacts life in the widest possible relational sense.

In his essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation" in *Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community*, Berry spoke against "a dualism that manifests itself in several ways: as a cleavage, a radical discontinuity, between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, and so on" (105). These dualisms are all related, but perhaps the most fundamental dualism of all is that between body and soul. The history of Western Civilization can in one sense be viewed as a long and painful divorce between these two fundamental aspects of the essence of humanity. Since the body-soul dualism is closely associated with the loss of sacramental

imagination, in the next chapter, I will seek to trace the factors that led to the great divorce.



## Chapter 2

### Genesis of the Body-Soul Dualism in Western Civilization

The deep division between the body and the soul, the material and the spiritual is one of the foremost characteristics of modernity. These fundamental fractures impact humans in their relationships to one another, to the world, to God, and ultimately to themselves in profound ways leading to widespread alienation, hopelessness, loss of meaning, and nihilism. In their fiction, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Wendell Berry poignantly address the dismal dualisms at the heart of modernity and provide a vision of what recapturing wholeness might mean for the wellbeing of humanity.

Although they come at the problem from different points of view, they each seem to point to sacramental ways of thinking and living as the antidote to the poisonous perils of separating that which was designed to be intimately joined together.

In order to understand the solution these authors put forth, it is important to grasp the manner in which the divisions occurred over time and how alternative ways of seeing the world once provided a more holistic and healthy approach to life. This chapter will seek to trace the outline of how the modern dualistic mindset is the result of a convergence of factors from within Western civilization that encompasses the sacred and the secular. From Plato, to Neoplatonism, to Gnosticism, to Augustine, to the Reformation, to Descartes, a powerful confluence of philosophical, religious, and scientific streams has inundated the modern mindset and cut fissures between that which was once seen as intimately linked together.

### *Plato's Prison House*

In “The Body of Western Embodiment,” Brooke Holmes notes that “Plato [427-347 B.C.E.] rightly occupies a seminal place in the tradition of embodiment because of the very strong opposition that he develops between soul and body” (25). This opposition is mostly clearly seen in his dialogue, *Phaedo*. *Phaedo* recounts the dialogue that Socrates had with his friends the day he drank poison in prison. Socrates argues that “the philosopher more than other men frees the soul from association with the body as much as possible” and “turns away from the body towards the soul” (Plato 64e, 65a). For Socrates, the body detracts from the soul’s ability to pursue wisdom through reason. Therefore, according to him, the pursuit of wisdom involves “freeing himself as far as possible from eyes and ears and, in a word, from the whole body, because the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom whenever it is associated with it” (66a). Rather than being an ally to the soul in the pursuit of the good, he sees the body as a hindrance to apprehending the truth and a source of confusion.

As long as we live, Socrates says, “we have a body and our soul is fused with such an evil we shall never adequately attain what we desire, which we affirm to be the truth” (66b). Socrates not only relegates the body to an inferior state as an impediment to the soul, but he declares it evil and sees embodiment as a form of enslavement (66d), contaminating folly (67a), and imprisonment (81e). Thus, one of the greatest philosophers in the history of Western Civilization makes denial of the body and escape from it essential to the pursuit of wisdom and the good life. If the body is despised, then the material world is also denigrated in favor of the incorporeal soul.

Holmes argues that although “*Phaedo* is often used as a source for Platonic dualism. But the dialogue is unusually vehement in its negative portrayal of the body, which is at one point dismissed simply as ‘evil.’ It should be read together with other dialogues for an accurate picture of Plato’s views” (45). Although Holmes is correct in asserting that the *Phaedo* represents the strongest repudiation of the body in the Platonic corpus, other dialogues she references still present a rather negative view of the body in comparison to the soul. Plato’s dialogue *Timaeus* provides an elaborate account of the creation of the cosmos. The description is generally positive, in contrast to gnostic views that will be discussed below. In his dialogue with Socrates, Timaeus reasons that the pattern that the father and maker of the universe used in creating the world was that of the unchangeable things: “If the world be indeed fair and the artificer good, it is manifest that he must have looked to that which is eternal; but if what cannot be said without blasphemy is true, then to the created pattern. Every one will see that he must have looked to the eternal; for the world is the fairest of creations and he is the best of causes” (13). The invisible and incorporeal world of ideal and eternal Forms serve as the model for creation of the universe by God, so its basis is absolutely positive in nature.

The preeminence of the soul in this creative process is apparent in the following passage:

Now the deeds of the best could never be or have been other than the fairest; and the creator, reflecting on the things which are by nature visible, found that no unintelligent creature taken as a whole was fairer than the intelligent taken as a whole; and that intelligence could not be present in anything which was devoid of

soul. For which reason, when he was framing the universe, he put intelligence in soul, and soul in body. (14)

The world itself was endowed with soul by the providence of God and the aspect of the soul that is highlighted above all else is intelligence—the rational faculty.

According to Timaeus’s account, the world soul is made prior to the body and brought together by God with the intent that the soul should rule over the body (16).

Thus, “The body of heaven is visible, but the soul is invisible, and partakes of reason and harmony, and being made by the best of intellectual and everlasting natures, is the best of things created” (18). Although God creates the perfection of the celestial world, he creates gods and entrusts them with completing the creation of the physical world because otherwise it would be equal with the gods. However, God creates the part of humans “worthy of the name immortal” and then hands the work over to the gods to “interweave the mortal with the immortal, and make and beget living creatures” (23). Accordingly, the gods took the four elements (fire, earth, water and air) and “fasten[ed] the courses of the immortal soul in a body which was in a state of perpetual influx and efflux” (24).

The soul “encased in a mortal body” is initially unstable and without intelligence, but is able through nurture and education to become a rational being and is able to attain the “fullness and health of the perfect man” (25) who is able to “seek for the divine in all things, as far as our nature admits, with a view to the blessed life” (47). Up to this point, Timaeus’s account seems rather positive in contrast to *Phaedo*. In *A Separate God: The Origins and Teachings of Gnosticism*, Simone Pétrement contrasts the optimism of the *Timaeus* with the pessimism of the *Phaedo* noting that “In the *Timaeus* the craftsman of

the world is good, and the world he has built is beautiful” (173). However, Pétrement notes that the world or cosmos is not the same thing as sensible things. Instead it is an order that must be perceived behind sensible things. Now the view of the created order becomes less positive with regard to the gods creation of the body. The gods, having received the immortal principle of the soul from God and proceeded to fashion a mortal body:

and made it to be the vehicle of the soul, and constructed within the body a soul of another nature which was mortal, subject to terrible and irresistible affections, — first of all, pleasure, the greatest incitement to evil; then, pain, which deters from good; also rashness and fear . . . anger . . . and hope easily led astray; —these they mingled with irrational sense and with all-daring love . . . and so framed man. (*Timaeus* 48)

Thus, sensations, emotions, affections, pleasures, and pain that come with embodiment all have the terrible potential to hinder the soul from its rational pursuit of God through the intellect.

Pleasure is given particular prominence as a potential provocation to evil in *Timaeus*. As Holmes indicates, “The claim that the body introduces disorder into the soul and life itself is again found in the *Timaeus*” (46). Although the created order is generally seen as good in that it springs from God and the gods, the body rather than being a fitting complement to the soul is seen as a potential source of problems. As Holmes indicates, “What is clear is that Socrates’ ideal is aspirational disembodiment: a turning-inward of the soul that minimizes engagement with the world of ‘visible’ things and the problems they foster” (46). Turning inward, away from the body and material world, toward the

soul's contemplation of the good (God), is the Socratic ideal for the pursuit of wisdom and happiness.

In *Alcibiades I*, Socrates posits to Alcibiades that man is one of three things: a soul, a body, or "both together forming a whole" (765). Socrates argues that "since neither the body, nor the union of the two, is man, either man has no real existence, or the soul is man" (766). In response to Socrates's questioning, Alcibiades acknowledges that the soul is man in direct contradiction to the idea that humans are a union of soul and body. In addition, since the ruling principle of the body is man, the soul is the ruling principle of the body. In one of Plato's later dialogues, *Philebus*, Socrates reasons that happiness is not to be found either in pleasure or the avoidance of pain. He indicates that "the soul was supposed to desire the opposite of the bodily state, while the body was the source of any pleasure or pain which was experienced" (375). Again, the soul's noble desires are directly opposed by the body, which seemingly is the source of desires to pursue pleasure and avoid pain. As Holmes summarizes, "the claim that it is risky for our true happiness to associate too closely with the body or to have a body in thrall to the phenomenal world is well established, most famously in the *Phaedo* but also in later texts such as the *Timaeus* and the *Philebus*" (45). In each of the three dialogues noted, Plato portrays the body and the material world as obstacles to the soul's wellbeing.

In her essay, Holmes argues that "the standard portrait of western philosophy's original somatophobe, usually drawn from the *Phaedo*, is misleadingly narrow and obscures the extent to which the body (*sōma*) is a variable and slippery term in the Platonic dialogues" (40). However, after reading the original texts she references along with her own comments, I conclude that even though it may be possible to discipline the

body to limit its negative effects on the soul as Plato indicates in the *Republic* and elsewhere, it is hard to find affirmations of the innate goodness of the body in his dialogues. As Holmes indicates, “In some of the most famous passages about the body in Plato’s dialogues, the body does act causally on the soul, and its effects are malign” (44). The best one can hope for is a quelling of the body’s passions and influence. “Alfred North Whitehead famously said that it is a safe generalization that all of Western philosophy is but a series of footnotes to Plato” (Hines xv). Given Plato’s immense influence on the history of Western philosophy and on Christianity in the West, as will be seen later, his thinking seems foundational for establishing the body-soul dualism that pervades Western consciousness to the present day. His follower, Plotinus, built on his ideas.

***Neoplatonism: Climbing the Ladder from the Material World to the One***

The apostles and early Christian fathers were not the only opponents of Gnosticism, which will be discussed below. The founder of Neoplatonism, Plotinus (c. 204-270 C.E.), wrote a treatise, *Against the Gnostics*, as part of his writings that were compiled and organized by his student, Porphyry (c. 234-305 C.E.) in the *Enneads*. Yet, Neoplatonism also involved a turning inward to find the divine even though it acknowledged that beauty seen in the material world could be a starting point from which to begin the journey upward. Neoplatonism provided different concepts of body and soul that affected Christianity in both positive and potentially negative ways. In *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, Richard Wallis summarizes Neoplatonism as follows: “the religiously toned synthesis of Plato’s thought inaugurated in the third century A.D. by Plotinus and continuing in its pagan form down to the sixth century A.D. The school thus formed the

dominant philosophical movement of the later Roman Empire, and was extremely influential on Medieval Christian and Moslem thought and mysticism” (1). Although it may have ceased to be a prominent religious and philosophical system of its own in the sixth century, Neoplatonism continues to have widespread influence through its impact on Christianity in the West.

Plotinus conceived of the One, which is equivalent to Plato’s idea of the Good, as the top of the hierarchy of being. It is eternal and the absolutely simple first principle or unity and the source of being for everything else, visible and invisible, in the universe. The next level of being is Intellect, which is the first derivation from the One. Each of the Platonic Forms is thought by the Intellect. As a beam of light is a unity that is refracted by a prism into the spectrum of colors seen in a rainbow, so as the Intellect contemplates the One, it accounts for the distinctness of all the varied Forms that are virtually united in the One. The Intellect is where the highest form of desire is found, a desire that is fully satisfied by contemplating the One. The third fundamental principle in Plotinus’s hierarchy is Soul. As the Intellect emanates from the One, so the Soul emanates from the Intellect. The internal activity of the Soul includes “the plethora of psychical activities of all embodied living things” while the external activity of the Soul is nature, which is “the intelligible structure of all that is other than soul in the sensible world, including the bodies of things with soul and things without soul” (*Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2). The world that can be apprehended with the senses contains images of the Forms residing within the Intellect. According to Plotinus all natural things are composed of matter, which is deprived of all form and intelligibility. Beyond this metaphysical sense



in which it is construed as evil, matter can become a barrier to the Soul's return to the One when it becomes an object of desire.

From Plotinus's perspective, the body is not inherently evil, but becomes corrupted when sensual pleasures become an object of desire that takes the place of a desire for the One. As Brian Hines indicates in *Return to the One*, "Matter is always many and the One is always one. Since presently we find ourselves existing in a material world, the challenge is to turn away from the multiplicity of matter if we have a desire to return to our source, unity" (79). Even though material things are not inherently evil since they ultimately emanate from the One, they are still inferior goods that one should turn away from. A person should be careful not to enjoy the goodness of the cosmos too much or for too long because that comes with the risk of getting too enmeshed in it. "The danger is that the soul will lose sight of the fact that it is soul and see itself as body. The weaver loses control, becomes enmeshed in the weaving, and comes to believe that he is part of the fabric of materiality" (Hines 133). Thus, the body-soul dualism remains in Neoplatonism, but in a somewhat more nuanced form. For Plotinus, "There is nothing more precious than the pure soul and this is what each of us truly is" (Hines 154). As with Plato, the true self is associated with the soul apart from the body.

The material universe is good to a degree, but to a much lesser extent than the spiritual realities from which it originates and derives its pattern. As Hines indicates, "earthly things don't debase the soul. The cause of our debasement is giving material things greater honor than they deserve and forgetting our true nature. It isn't the world that draws us away from spirituality but rather our inability to control what is meant to be under our command" (Hines 155). However, true human nature is identified with the

soul, exclusive of the body. Enjoying the One and the physical creation emanating from the One at the same time seems inconceivable from a Neoplatonist framework. As Hines notes, “The soul is pulled in two directions, toward unity, and toward multiplicity. One way takes us closer to the creator, the other closer to creation” (149). Being close to both the divine creator and His creation seem mutually exclusive in Neoplatonic philosophy. “Instead of wisely choosing to return to the One we’ve made a pilgrimage in the opposite direction to worship at the Shrine of Materiality. The creation, rather than the creator, has captured our love and attention” (Hines 150).

Of course, being overly materialistic would indeed be a problem, but the idea that one could gratefully receive the material world as a loving gift from God that is meant to both be enjoyed and to draw one to Him at the same time does not seem possible from a Neoplatonist construct. When a parent gives a child a birthday present, it is quite possible that the child will receive it with gratitude, enjoy it, feel loved through the tangible expression of the gift, and be drawn closer to the parent, all at the same time. Hines indicates that “Coming into a physical body doesn’t necessarily degrade us because it is possible, though rather rare, to live in accord with the spirit even while sojourning in matter” (156). Saints and sages are among the few who learn to live in the body while continually choosing the spiritual over the physical.

According to Plotinus, “What we must fly from is our love affair with matter, particularly the matter that we wrongly believe to be us, our bodies” (Hines 162). Again, the body is not considered even a part of our real identity, so we should not cherish it or the world. “[S]ince physical creation is the lowest manifestation of being there isn’t much good to be found in it. The universe is akin to the dregs at the bottom of a cup of coffee,

almost totally drained of pleasing flavor” (Hines 162). Although Gnosticism and Neoplatonism view the material world differently, in a practical sense they end up pretty much at the same place because in Neoplatonism the lesser good of the physical cosmos is easily diminished to something of little worth at all and a serious risk for the soul, even if not an intrinsic evil as with Gnosticism. As Lesley-Anne Dyer Williams indicates in “Beautiful Bodies and Shameful Embodiment in Plotinus’s *Enneads*,” Plotinus “taught a problematic view of *human* embodiment because human souls could easily become distracted from their proper objects of philosophical contemplation by temporal, transient bodies” (71). The wrappings around matter are attractive because they are images of the spiritual forms (Hines 165). In this way, they can serve as a sacramental impetus that leads one upward to God.

However, reuniting with the spiritual forms like virtue and beauty are only possible “when the soul returns to the immaterial world of the spirit” (Hines 165). Thus, Neoplatonism is still a form of escapism that seeks disconnection from the body and the physical cosmos. As Plotinus indicates: “The sphere of sense, The Soul in its slumber; for all of the Soul that is in the body is asleep and the true getting-up is not bodily but from the body: in any movement that takes the body with it there is no more than a passage from sleep to sleep . . . the veritable waking or rising is from corporeal things” (3.6.6). Embodied life is but a dream and the only way to wake up is to rise above the corporeal. Separating from matter and holding to the spirit provides the pathway to peace and blessing (Hines 167). Only in a bodiless state is the soul free “to enjoy the delights of the spiritual forms or the ineffable wonder of the One” (Hines 169). Mentally leaving the

body and material world behind is the way home to unity in the One according to Plotinus.

Return to the One should be the goal for humans according to Plotinus. In order to approach the One, one must ascend up the hierarchy of being. Beginning with beautiful things in the world that can be observed with the senses and that are lovely because of their “communion in Ideal-Form” and the “thought that flows from the Divine” (*Confessions* 5.1, *Enneads* 1.6.2.6, 1.6.2.10, 5.1.4), the soul must turn inward leaving the sensual world behind and realize its own superior beauty (*Confessions* 7.16, *Enneads* 1.6.1.1, 1.6.1.17, 1.6.4.1, 1.6.4.3, 1.6.5.2, 1.6.8.2, 5.1.1, 5.1.12). If one looks inward and finds that their soul is ugly rather than beautiful, the soul must first undergo a purgation to remove improper desires, passions and vices that result from too intimate of a connection with the body and that weigh the soul down and inhibit its upward ascent.

In *Confessions* 10.38-70, Augustine recounts his own struggles with the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, which glued him to the material world and hindered his ascent to God. Augustine had to be ravished and set on fire with a consuming desire for God before he could achieve the continence that brought him from disintegration into a multiplicity of desires into the unity of hunger and thirst supremely for God (*Conf.* 10.38, 40, 42). After turning inward and purifying itself, the soul continues to climb upward toward the source of its divine origin and is gathered together from a “multiplicity of distractions” through the concentration of the rational intellect or inner vision on contemplating the One (*Conf.* 7.23, 10.65, 11.39, *Enneads* 5.1.5).

Williams summarizes the Neoplatonist view of the body as follows: “Plotinus hates the body only insofar as it is hindrance to the soul’s ascent. The body itself is good.

Its beauty is a testimony to the craftsmanship of its maker, and the way Nature guides it is evidence of the providential care of the Intellect” (86). These competing concepts of the body as good and beautiful and yet a serious threat to the soul’s rising up to the One seem to create a profound ambivalence about the body. Neoplatonism was deeply influential on Augustine who in turn profoundly impacted both Catholic and Protestant Christian theology and carried over this ambivalence about the body into the mainstream of Christianity.

### ***Augustine’s Christianized Neoplatonism***

As Hines indicates, in *The City of God*, Augustine lavishes much praise on Plato and Plotinus (319). Connecting the philosophic ideas of Plato to a distinctly religious idea of ascent to the One was appealing to many like Augustine. Given his philosophical nature, it is not surprising that Augustine needed to find a solid basis with which to seek God with his mental faculties. The Neoplatonist writings of Plotinus helped Augustine to reconceive his notions of God and how He must be approached. In Platonism, Augustine found a philosophical system that he thought was highly compatible with Christianity. Although Augustine came to believe that faith in the authoritative teaching of the Church was essential to true belief, knowing was ultimately better than true belief and the philosophy of Plato as interpreted by Plotinus was key to understanding the nature of God and how to approach Him. Indeed, one must understand something of the basics of Plotinus’s interpretation of Platonic philosophy, if they would grasp the significance of several key passages in the *Confessions*.

Although Augustine is somewhat cryptic when describing the process by which he came to experience visions of the One in Books VII, IX and X of the *Confessions*, he

does give some important clues, especially in *Confessions* 10.65. After examining his own body and senses, he moved into the vast resources of his memory. Through his rational faculties, Augustine was able to make rich and wonderful discoveries as he “traversed everything, and tried to make distinctions and to evaluate each entity according to its proper rank . . . [he] investigated all these matters to discover whether they existed, what they were, and what value should be attached to them.” During this process of intellectual inquiry, Augustine sensed that God was teaching him and giving him instructions. In general, Augustine found pleasure in such investigations, but sometimes they led to “a feeling marked by a strange sweetness,” which although fleeting was an “experience quite beyond anything in this life.” In *Confessions*, 7.16, he describes a beatific vision where he saw Being in immutable light and was shocked by the radiance of God’s rays such that he trembled with love and awe and heard God’s voice within his heart. In this instance, turning the rational faculties inward in accordance with the admonitions he read in the Platonic books led to an experience that ultimately transcended the mind.

The vision of God that Augustine and his mother experienced together at Ostia shortly before her death is recounted in Book IX of the *Confessions*. Coming near the end of the chronological narration of Augustine’s life story, this account fittingly describes an ascent to God. Augustine and his mother were leaning out a window overlooking a garden when they began the conversation that would lead to their upward ascent to God. Augustine indicates that he and Monica metaphorically “drank in the waters flowing from your spring on high, ‘the spring of life’ (Ps. 35:10) which is with you” with the mouths of their hearts as they considered the quality of eternal life that the saints will enjoy (*Conf.*

9.23). The peals of Platonic philosophy ring loud and clear as Augustine poetically tries to capture the mystical experience in words:

Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection towards eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds. We moved beyond them so as to attain the region of inexhaustible abundance where you feed Israel eternally with the truth for food. There life is the wisdom by which all creatures come into being, both things which were and which will be . . . And while we talked and panted after it, we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart. (10.24)

It would perhaps be difficult to find a more succinct and eloquent summary of Plotinian philosophy in terms of the soul's upward ascent to the One.

Despite the beauty of this scene from Augustine's life, I would argue that the synthesis of Neoplatonism and Christianity in Augustine's thought and life ultimately had some deleterious consequences for views of the body and the material world in Western forms of Christianity. In *Once Out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body*, Andrea Nightingale notes that "In Augustine's view, humans are extraterrestrials who have 'fallen' on a land where they do not belong. For humans, earth is a place of unbelonging" (3). This view sets up a basis for a sense of existential estrangement from the world rather than intimate connection with it. This is compounded by a sense that the world is not to be enjoyed. As Nightingale indicates, "Augustine insisted that Christians should not take pleasure in [the natural world's] physical beauty. Rather, they should treat this beauty as

a mere sign of God's wisdom and omnipotence" (6). In one sense, Augustine's views are sacramental in that the material creation is intended to point people to their creator (i.e., as a means to worship). In another sense though, God is not to be experienced and enjoyed *in* and *through* His creation.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine described his situation prior to his conversion to Christianity as follows: "you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made . . . The lovely things kept me far from you" (10.38). Although it is understandable that Augustine felt his desire for God was improperly overshadowed by being enamored with the loveliness of creation in his pre-conversion state, he seems to indicate that this same threat applies to Christians. For example, he notes that "Although health is the reason for eating and drinking, a dangerous pleasantness joins itself to the process like a companion. Many a time it tries to take first place, so that I am doing for pleasure what I profess or wish to do only for health's sake" (10.44). For Augustine, food is only fuel to sustain bodily health and its flavors are not to be savored because we might be too captivated by them. The reason that God created food that tastes good and that is not uniformly bland does not seem to be considered or adequately appreciated by Augustine. I would argue that God created food to simultaneously produce health, enjoyment, and communion with Him and other people as is beautifully pictured in the movie "Babette's Feast," which will be discussed in the next chapter. This seems to me to be the essence of the Eucharist. It is also beautifully illustrated in the Old and New Testaments.

After the people of Israel affirmed the covenant with God, "Moses went up [on the mountain], also Aaron, Nabab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and



they saw the God of Israel. And there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire stone, and it was like the very heavens in its clarity . . . So they saw God, and they ate and drank” (Exodus 24:9-11). The physical act of eating and drinking did not detract from the beatific vision and there is no reason to think that God would have wanted them to enjoy anything less than the best of His creation as they feasted in His presence. Similarly, when the people of Israel brought the tithes of their agricultural produce to God each year they were told: “when the LORD your God has blessed you . . . you shall spend that money for whatever your heart desires; for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever you heart desires; you shall eat there before the LORD your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household” (Deuteronomy 14:24-26). The Israelites were commanded to feast before God, to have fellowship with Him in a way that satisfied their heart’s desires and led to communal rejoicing. Seeing food as mere fuel demeans the gift and the giver, the creation and the Creator. Physical and spiritual nourishment and pleasure were conjoined and enabled special communion with God and other humans. It also overflowed in generosity to the Levites who devoted themselves to spiritual labors as well as to the aliens and widows.

It is also worth noting that when Jesus did his first miracle, turning water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee, the master of the wedding feast was amazed that they had saved the choice wine for last (John 2:9-10). When Jesus makes wine for a wedding feast, he makes it the best and most enjoyable wine conceivable. To linger over and thoroughly enjoy God’s good material gifts individually and corporately with other believers is to more fully comprehend the love and goodness of the Creator—not a distraction, if rightly discerned.

The tension Augustine feels between the ability of the material world to be an impetus in rising up to God and gluing the soul downward to the Earth is illustrated in another passage from the *Confessions*. He notes that when he sees a dog chasing a rabbit in the countryside that “it distracts me perhaps indeed from thinking out some weighty matter . . . shifting the inclination of my heart . . . Unless you had proved to me my infirmity and quickly admonished me either to take the sight as the start for some reflection enabling me to rise up to you or wholly to scorn and pass the matter by, I would be watching like an empty-headed fool” (10.57). For Augustine, the animals can be either a way to begin contemplating God or a distraction from the very same thing. Similarly, as he looks at a lizard catching flies or a spider entrapping them, he is fascinated by them and notes that “The sight leads me to praise you, the marvelous Creator and orderer of all things, but that was not how my attention first began. It is one thing to rise rapidly, another thing not to fall” (10.57). If one quickly moves from created things to a contemplation of their Creator, all is well, but created things can lead to either rising or falling. To enjoy and savor the good gifts of the Creator with our bodies is at best a waste of time for the ascetic Augustine and at worst a dangerous peril. In contrast, for a poet like Wendell Berry, pausing to deeply reflect upon and delight in the goodness of creation is a principle means for apprehending a God who is immanent in every facet of the world.

Nightingale argues that “Throughout his life, Augustine maintained the soul-body dualism that he originally found in the Platonists. But he countered the Platonists by elevating the status of the body, making it a fit and necessary partner for the soul” (106-7). Rather than seeing the body as a source of evil and a prison house from which we

should long to be freed, Augustine indicates we should love our bodies and especially long to have resurrected bodies when “with a unified soul and an unchanging body, one can finally coincide with oneself” (106). Yet, Nightingale also notes that “Augustine claims that the body ‘weighs down’ the soul, moving it toward the earth. In worshipping God, however, the upward weight of love offers a counterweight to the heaviness of the body. In Augustine’s view, a healthy body will have a ‘lightness of being.’” (106)

At the very least, it appears that in Augustine there is some ambivalence about the body, especially in its fallen state. In discussing Augustine’s dialogue, *De libero arbitrio* (Freedom of the Will), Erik Kenyon indicates that for Augustine, “sin is simply the result of human beings turning their will toward lower goods, such as bodily pleasure, in a way that shuts them off to higher goods, such as virtue” (170-1). The source of sin is in the will, which is part of the soul. While the body is not intrinsically evil, there is a tendency among human beings to pursue bodily pleasures, so in that way it is easy for the body to weigh down the soul if people are not careful.

Nightingale and Hines seem to be generally affirming in their consideration of Augustine’s views of the relationship between the body and soul. From my perspective, Augustine deals well with the problem of evil, but not with what for him seems to be the problem of pleasure. His Christianized version of Neoplatonism gives the body greater dignity and retains a vital hope in the resurrection. However, in my reading, his problem with bodily pleasure as antithetical to the soul’s good retains the fundamental problems of the body-soul dualism. Augustine fundamentally recognizes the existence of greater and lesser goods, but does not seem to accept that enjoying the intrinsic pleasures that the

Creator instilled in lesser goods could be a vital part of the fellowship of embodied souls (or ensouled bodies) with God and with each other.

Augustine's ambivalence about the body and championing of asceticism, as will be noted below, leads to only a partially sacramental view of the material world. While recognizing that all the lesser goods point to the greater Good, he seems to falter in not seeing the material gifts of love from God that our embodied souls enjoy as that which can propel one to a more profound relationship with the Creator. Having considered Neoplatonism and its influence on Christianity, it seems appropriate to address another form of religious devotion that competed with Christianity and Neoplatonism during the first few centuries after the coming of Christ, and continues to have profound influence to the present day.

### ***Gnosticism: Ancient and Modern***

From its earliest days, Christianity has struggled against the heresy of Gnosticism. Although the early church councils rejected Gnosticism as heresy, its dualistic ways of perceiving the world have continued to plague Christianity to the present day. In *Against the Protestant Gnostics*, Philip Lee notes that "Critics of orthodox Christianity are quick to point out that a great deal of what we have referred to as gnosticism has existed within the Church throughout its history. The world-denying, escapist, elitist themes have had their advocates in every Christian era" (45). Both Paul and John appear to address anti-gnostic themes in the New Testament. In addition, church leaders like Ignatius (d. ca. 110 C.E.), Justin Martyr (ca. 100-ca. 165 C.E.), Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200 C.E.), Tertullian of Carthage (ca. 160-ca. 220 C.E.), Hippolytus (ca. 170-ca. 236 C.E.), Origen of Alexandria

(ca. 185-ca. 254 C.E.), and many others rallied against what was seen as a significant threat to the faith (Lee 5).

Gnosticism had significant appeal to many within the church and Lee indicates that it was “the overriding issue facing the Christian community during the first four centuries of our era” (5). Although the roots of Gnosticism are uncertain, Lee identifies several characteristics of the gnostic type, including: a mood of despair; a sense of alienation; a belief that the material world is the result of a “cosmic faux pas;” a desire to escape the world through a form of religious knowledge; a narcissistic concentration on the self; and syncretism (Lee 8-11). There are many parallels between Gnosticism and the spirit that characterizes modernity, including alienation, hopelessness, escapism, and narcissism.

Lee summarizes the gnostic view of the world as follows: “The ancient gnostic, looking at the world through despairing eyes, saw matter in terms of decay, place in terms of limitation, time in terms of death. In light of this tragic vision, the logical conclusion seemed to be that the cosmos itself—matter, place, time, change, body, and everything seen, heard, touched or smelled—must have been a colossal error” (8). With such a pessimistic view of everything material, it is not surprising that the gnostics sought a way of escape. The parallels to Platonic concepts of the physical cosmos as noted in *Phaedo*, are apparent. In fact, Adolph von Harnack asserted that ‘The gnostic systems represent the acute secularising or hellenizing of Christianity’ and A. D. Nock referred to Gnosticism as ‘Platonism run wild’ (Lee 5-6). Although a simple Hellenization theory is no longer the prevailing consensus, Hans Jonas in his book *Gnostic Religion* indicated that ‘The gnostic systems compounded everything—oriental mythologies, astrological

doctrines, Iranian theology, elements of Jewish tradition . . . Christian salvation-eschatology, Platonic terms and concepts' (Lee 11). Therefore, Platonic concepts seemed to be among the mix of ideas that were syncretized into gnostic thought.

Because matter was considered inherently evil by gnostics, there needed to be some way to place distance between God and the material world. The solution was to "to remove from God . . . the stigma of Creation" (Lee 9). To do so, the Gnostics interjected the concept of the Demiurge. Pétrement notes that "The Demiurge, that is to say, the God of the Old Testament, believed and proclaimed himself to be the true God. He wished to be sole ruler of the human soul. But the Savior came, sent by his Father who is high above the Demiurge and whom the Demiurge does not know. Descending into the world, the Savior taught the existence of this God, whose kingdom is the transcendent realm of truth" (31). Thus, the gnostics distinguish between the creator of the Old Testament and the God that reveals himself in the New Testament. They also indicate that Archons, the rulers of the heavens, collaborated with their father, the Demiurge, in the work of creation, especially the creation of humanity (Pétrement 29). As Lee notes, "Out of these ingenious dualist systems . . . there is a picture of the world which is depressing to say the least. The cosmos is an abortion; humanity, in the fleshly sense, along with all materiality, is a mistake" (17). With such a worldview, an escape from the body and the material world becomes an attractive alternative.

Also, since matter is inherently evil or not associated with the truly divine in any way, Christ's incarnation must also be transformed in Gnosticism. The gnostics were docetists who "often seem[ed] to say that the body of Christ and his crucifixion had been nothing but appearances" (Pétrement 38). The Apostle's Creed, one of the earliest

Christian confessions of faith, seems to be a direct repudiation of many of the anti-materialistic gnostic ideas with its assertion that “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth; and in Jesus Christ, His only Son . . . Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate; was crucified, died, and was buried . . . the third day He arose again from the dead.” Against what was branded as gnostic heresy, the early church affirmed God’s role as creator of the entire cosmos and the incarnation, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Stronger affirmations of the physical world and the body hardly seem imaginable than that formulated in the early confessions of the Church.

Yet, Gnosticism did not simply pass away after the first few centuries of the church, but has exhibited remarkable staying power and influence up to the present day. Lee notes that “The Church has, to a degree, been Gnosticized as, in turn, it has been hellenized, Platonized, stoicized and romanticized” (45). Lee traces the influence of Gnosticism throughout church history to its influence on Protestantism in North America in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century noting that “From Simon Stylites to St. Francis of Assisi to certain aspects of Calvinism, the aversion to this world with a desire to escape it has been one of the most prominent strands in the fabric of Christianity” (49). Although a comprehensive summary of Gnosticism is beyond the scope of this thesis, it is worth noting a few prominent examples to demonstrate the influence of Gnostic ideas across church history.

### Asceticism

In the New Testament era and the period prior to which Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313 C.E. making Christianity a legal religion within the Roman Empire, the martyrs who died during periods of persecution were the heroes of the Church. Once

the era of martyrdom had passed, the ascetic hermits became the foremost exemplars of spirituality. Athanasius's (296-373 C.E.) *Life of Antony* was particularly influential in popularizing the ascetic isolationist ideal, which became a widespread movement.

Antony (c. 251-356 C.E.) was an Egyptian Christian ascetic who is often considered the founder and father of organized Christian monasticism. His discipline included celibacy, being generally isolated from others, eating very little food (mostly bread and water), frequent fasting, wearing a hair shirt, sleeping on bare ground or on a rush mat, and other modes of bodily privation and exposure combined with constant prayer and scripture memorization. After 15 years on the outskirts of his village, he decided to move to a desert fortress across the Nile where he spent most of the rest of his life. As Athanasius indicates, Antony "persuaded many to take up the solitary life. And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city of monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens" (42-3). Eventually, a great many monasteries came into being. As Nightingale indicates, "In the 'bloodless martyrdom' of asceticism, the Christians found ways to move their bodies up toward heaven" (21). Although apparently motivated by sincere and good intentions, Antony and others like him set the stage for a spirituality generally characterized by continually buffeting the body and isolation from the world.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine (354-430 C.E.) refers to his introduction to Antony's life by Ponticianus, a baptized Christian believer. The story of Antony's conversion and life was apparently influential in Augustine's own conversion (8.14-15, 8.29). Although he did not ultimately turn to monasticism following his conversion, "In the *Confessions* and other texts, Augustine offers a specific ascetic model for Christians



to imitate: celibacy, fasting, and the rejection of sensual pleasures . . . Augustine’s sermons and texts have served to regulate the bodily practices—and especially sexual practices—of orthodox Catholics up to the present day” (Nightingale 21). As he indicates in *Confessions*, Augustine felt that he needed to turn away from a life of sensuality, in general, and sex, in particular, in order to turn to God. Nightingale notes that in the *Confessions* Augustine:

promotes his own ascetic practices: for example, he attempts to eat food like medicine, rather than to enjoy its flavor; he worries over his occasional wet dreams, which are at odds with his renunciation of sex; he rebukes himself for watching animal life in nature, which directs him toward the bodily world; and he worries over the pleasure that music gives the senses.” (147)

For Augustine, the body and the material world are not inherently evil, but lesser goods that can glue the soul downward and keep it from climbing upward to God, if one is not vigilant.

After his conversion, Augustine strongly repudiated the Manichaeism that had attracted him for a number of years and “was especially sensitive to the threat of that form of *gnosis*” (Lee 51). The Manichees believed that sin is a “physical reality which has entered the cosmos from the outside” (Lee 51). Nightingale summarizes Augustine’s views of the nature of the body as follows: “The body is not an alien or evil substance by nature, as the Manichaeans suggested. Still, it does have a ‘carnal effect’ that makes it resistant to full control. Clearly, Augustine was walking a fine between Manichaean and Pelagian doctrines” (217). The beauty and attractiveness of the natural world can weigh the soul down.

However, it was in his response to another adversary, the Pelagians, that Augustine may have inadvertently opened the door to “many of the peculiarly Western forms of anti-physical, anti-body, anti-cosmic thought as well as the Western forms of world-escaping praxis (Lee 51). The Pelagians thought that humans were inherently good and did not believe in the doctrine of original sin. In his argument in favor of original sin, Paul Ricoeur notes that Augustine when citing Romans 5:12 to support his position added to the term original sin the words *per generationem* and thereby gave a literal interpretation to the Apostle Paul’s words, “And so death spread [through procreation] to all men” (Lee 51). Lee sees Augustine’s theology as an example of “the orthodox Church—in its heated conversation with gnosticism—being led further down the gnostic path than otherwise it would wish to go” (50-1). Further discussion, of Augustine’s views regarding the physical world were addressed earlier.

### Medieval Period

In “Scholastic Philosophers on the Role of the Body in Knowledge,” Rafael Nájera notes that for most medieval Christian thinkers from Augustine in the 4<sup>th</sup> century through the 16<sup>th</sup> century, “humans are first and foremost their soul. Human bodies, and the material in general, are normally considered not only lowly, but also more or less an encumbrance. The emphasis on the body as a hurdle in the path towards God is all the more clear in a figure like Augustine, for whom knowledge (*scientia*) is integral in that path” (144). When intellectual contemplation is the primary or sole means for knowing God, the body can easily get in the way of the soul’s ascent.

Acts of love and service to others for which the body is essential seem to receive short shrift. As Nájera indicates, “for Hugh [of St. Victor], as for most medieval thinkers,

body and soul are of two different kinds, and thus the interaction between them is especially problematic” (145). The lowly material and the nobler spiritual are at different ends of the hierarchy, and purification of the material into the spiritual occurs in the mind (Nájera 144-5). “In the end . . . theological concerns mandate that the body be put in its proper place below the intellect and to be cast as, in a way, an encumbrance to human perfection, or, more precisely, the perfection of the intellectual soul” (Nájera 170). This again seems to point to a kind of gnostic approach where bodily activities are diminished in favor of the pursuit of knowledge of God through contemplation.

### Calvinism

Among the Reformers, Lee cites John Calvin as a prominent example of gnostic ideas infiltrating the church. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin indicates that “Therefore, so long as we dwell in the prison of the body, we must constantly struggle with the vices of our corrupt nature, and so with our natural disposition” (373). Not only in that passage, but in 11 other passages in the *Institutes*, Calvin refers to the body as a prison. The following passage is particularly worth noting at some length:

Let believers, then, in forming an estimate of this mortal life, and perceiving that in itself it is nothing but misery, make it their aim to exert themselves with greater alacrity, and less hinderance [sic], in aspiring to the future and eternal life. When we contrast the two, the former may not only be securely neglected, but, in comparison of the latter, be disdained and contemned. If heaven is our country, what can the earth be but a place of exile? If departure from the world is entrance into life, what is the world but a sepulchre [sic], and what is residence in it but immersion in death? If to be freed from the body is to gain full possession of

freedom, what is the body but a prison? If it is the very summit of happiness to enjoy the presence of God, is it not miserable to want it? But “whilst we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord,” (2 Cor. 5:6). Thus when the earthly is compared with the heavenly life, it may undoubtedly be despised and trampled under foot. We ought never, indeed, to regard it with hatred . . . and even this hatred ought not to be directed against life itself . . . Still let us ardently long for death, and constantly meditate upon it, and in comparison with future immortality, let us despise life, and, on account of the bondage of sin, long to renounce it whenever it shall so please the Lord. (439)

In the passage above, Calvin not only refers to the body as a prison, but to life as a crypt that is to be despised. Much like Socrates in *Phaedo*, Calvin indicates the believer should long ardently for death as a freedom from bondage.

To be fair, Calvin is speaking in relative terms and views coming nearer to God’s presence as the ultimate good. However, the passage Calvin quotes from 2 Corinthians seems to represent Paul desiring to be closer to God, but also to be clothed with a resurrected body. The quote from Calvin elucidates Berry’s comment that “I was never satisfied by the Protestantism that I inherited. I think because of the dualism of soul and body, heaven and Earth. Creator and creation—a dualism so fierce at times that it counted hatred of this life and this world as a virtue” (Dalton 33). Yet, as Lee notes, “Not even Calvin’s severest critics would argue that his spirituality led to a disdain for worldly affairs” (73). Relief for the poor, good government, Christian education, frequent celebration of the Eucharist, and better music for congregational singing were all embodied activities that he championed.

Nevertheless, the body-soul dualism is clearly evident in his thoughts as noted above. Calvin seems to be representative of the following general characterization provided by Lee: “Gnostics of all eras have . . . maintained a most profound mistrust of the body, regarding it as the enemy *without* that constantly tries to undo the best efforts of the soul *within*. They regarded physical life as either an illusion or a distraction from higher purposes” (130). In this mindset, the body is pitted against the soul. Augustine on the other hand sees the sin problem of human kind as being primarily located in the will, which is part of the soul’s faculties. The changes in views of the sacraments as a result of the Reformation also had a negative influence as will be discussed in the next chapter.

#### North American Protestantism

As noted above, Berry recoils from the view of the body and material world as something to escape from rather than embrace. Lee argues that “Insofar as North American Protestantism functions as an escapist religion, refusing to come to grips with nature or history, it promotes the practice of religion as something that can be done ‘on the side.’” (194). Although one might try to temporarily escape a focus on the body and the material world, perhaps by going to church one day a week for an hour or so, humans still need to eat, to work, to interact with one another, and to engage the material world in countless ways.

When religion is something that can be practiced on the side, it has tremendous impacts on ethics. For a religion that can be practiced on the side is easily separated from economics, politics, sexuality, environmental stewardship, etc. As Lee indicates, “The religion of love . . . is something one escapes to, out of the horror of mundane life. Christianity is a faith practiced on the side” (195). A body-denying religion of love

practiced on the side becomes a religion that can fool itself into loving one's neighbor in principle, but being almost clueless as to how to love them in practice. Within such a framework, cultural assumptions like the rightness of a dog-eat-dog capitalism that is more akin to Darwinian views of the survival of the fittest than biblical Christianity are easily accepted as a dogma of sorts that is nearly beyond reproach. In his essays, Berry points out in numerous ways how escapist forms of Christianity result in the antithesis of love lived out.

Escapist forms of Christianity also undermine religious practice at its core in both fundamentalist and liberal forms of Protestantism. As Lee indicates, "What is escaped in liberal Protestantism is the embarrassing humanity of Jesus, the confining physicality of his ministry, the witness of his poverty, the earthly failure of his mission, the even more discomforting presence of the Church he established" (196). Rather than escaping the world, the scandal of the incarnation is that God deliberately entered the world in human flesh in the most lowly of circumstances to redeem humanity and the world. The religion Jesus practiced was embodied and focused on the good of others. "In breaking away from the bondage of the earthly Jesus Christ and his earthly Church with its earthly sacraments, liberals have been enabled to escape the reality of the world as it has been exposed by the humanity of Jesus" (Lee 196). Although Lee's last statement focuses on liberal Christians, in many ways it would be equally applicable to more fundamentalist forms of Protestantism that can tend to focus more on intellectual assent to propositional truth found in the Bible than to application of such truth to every sphere of life. Lee's reference to breaking away from the sacraments of the church is particularly important and will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

If one would escape the world, one must turn inward. As Lee indicates, “Salvation, for present-day gnostics as for ancient gnostics, can be found only through discovering the spark within. That search entails the willingness to separate the self from all binding earthly ties” (197). The self-focused view is narcissistic and fits well into the individualistic spirit that is so common in American culture. Lee argues that “Roman Catholic interests are predominantly communal, whereas Protestant interests are for the most part individualistic” (201). Again, a gnostic view of life separates people from each other and the world even as it divides them from their own bodies.

As Ragen Sutterfield argues in *Wendell Berry and the Given Life*, “Christians have never been able to fully shake the Gnostic heresy. It has the appeal of escape rather than redemption of this world. Rather than a renewed heavens and a renewed earth, it promises ‘sweet heaven by and by, way up in the sky’” (106). Christian hope is ultimately grounded in material and bodily realities like creation; the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, bodily ascension, and promised physical return of Christ; and the hope of living in a new heavens and a new Earth in resurrected bodies.

The Bible affirms the goodness and giftedness of God’s Creation; therefore, to despise it seems like blasphemy. The heavens and the Earth display God’s glory for all to see. Both His immanence and transcendence are affirmed, but there can be no doubt that the incarnation, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit to dwell in believers in the here and now, and the promise that God will dwell among His people in a new heavens and new Earth are past, present, and future assurances of His intent to fulfill the beatific vision and to be the *summum bonum* of his people for all eternity. Humans live in a world that suffers the consequences of the Fall, but God’s grace is everywhere to be found among

the brokenness. The Psalmist David was able to praise God for His goodness and mercy that he was convinced would follow him all the days of his life (Psalm 23:6), even as he longed for the day when he would dwell in the house of the Lord to behold the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in His temple (Psalm 27:4).

As Sutterfield<sup>2</sup> notes, “The Gnostics were, like Descartes, dualists—separating the world into the spiritual and the material. The spiritual was good, the sphere of freedom and wisdom, while the material world was evil, the source of our pain and folly” (105). Sutterfield connects the dualism of the Gnostics to that of Descartes. It is important to understand how Cartesian ways of seeing the world have also shaped the Western imagination.

### ***Descartes’s Mechanical Philosophy***

Despite the dualistic influences noted above, Western Civilization, which was dominated by Christianity, retained a holistic sense of a connected cosmos through much of the early modern period. As Lawrence Principe notes in *The Scientific Revolution*:

When early modern thinkers looked out on the world, they saw a *cosmos* . . . a well-ordered and arranged whole. They saw the various components of the physical universe tightly interwoven with one another, and joined intimately to human beings and to God. Their world was woven together in a complex web of connections and interdependencies, its every corner filled with purpose and rich with meaning. (21)

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<sup>2</sup> Sutterfield beautifully summarizes several key themes within Berry’s oeuvre with chapters on Givenness, Humility, Love, Economics, Work, Sabbath, Stability, Membership, The Body and the Earth, Language, Peaceableness, and The Prophet. The quotes indicated here are from *The Body and the Earth*.



Because early modern thinkers saw rich connections of positive mutuality between humans, nature, and God, matter had meaning and value. As Principe indicates, “early modern thinkers, like their medieval forebears, looked out on a world of connections and a world full of purpose and meaning as well as of mystery, wonder, and promise” (38).

The natural philosophers of the early modern period, believed that “God built messages into the fabric of creation for man to uncover” and this desire to read messages from God in nature “provided the single greatest driving force for scientific inquiry throughout the entire early modern period” (Principe 57). Men like Johannes Kepler (1571-1630 C.E.), Robert Boyle (1627-1691 C.E.), and Isaac Newton (1643-1727 C.E.) were exemplars of this connected worldview of natural philosophy that preceded modern science where the material world was not to be despised as an impediment to the search for wisdom, but absolutely an essential part of finding it. However, change in this way of viewing the world came about as a result of the ascendancy of the mechanical philosophy championed by René Descartes (1596-1650 C.E.).

As John Henry notes in *A Short History of Scientific Thought*, Descartes believed that all physical reality “can be explained in terms of matter and motion, and nothing else” (133). Rejecting occult influences and phenomena, he developed laws of nature that could be used to predict the behavior of physical systems; something that did not exist before his time. His mechanical philosophy was so successful that it surpassed Aristotelianism as the way most natural philosophers viewed the world (Henry 136).

Although Descartes believed that his mechanical philosophy could explain all physical phenomena, he thought that humans have rational and immortal souls that could not be explained in the same manner. As Alison Peterman states in “Descartes and

Spinoza: Two Approaches to Embodiment,” from Descartes’s perspective, “A human being involves a mind and a body, each of which is a substance distinct from and independent of the other” (217). She goes on to note that Descartes struggled with how to relate the mind to the body and in many contexts emphasized their union rather than their distinction (221). However, he did not believe that animals had souls. Peterman indicates that for Descartes, “An animal is a physical machine, and so is a human in respect of the functions that it shares with animals” (217). The philosophical doctrine of “dualism” is associated with a number of European philosophers, but particularly Descartes above all the rest as Justin Smith notes in the “Introduction” to *Embodiment: A History* (7).

It was a short step from the mechanical philosophy of Descartes to Deism and atheism—from the belief that the world functioned by natural laws imposed on it by a creator God to “an entirely mechanistic system devoid of both God and the soul” (Henry 139). A number of Descartes’s followers argued that there is no human soul and humans, like animals, are only machines (Henry 139). Henry notes that “in our secular world most of us believe in a mechanical world” (139). Though Newton’s laws soon superseded Descartes’s natural laws and Newton combined “the mechanical philosophy with a belief in the reality of occult forces and power” (Henry 151), Descartes’s legacy continues to flourish to the present day and became the impetus for scientific materialism with its ascendancy over all other ways of knowing the world.

In *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man*, Bryan Appleyard notes that Pascal stated that he could not forgive Descartes because “Descartes had done everything except secure the position of God, and thereby the meaning of man” (48). Appleyard goes on to summarize Descartes’s epistemological influence as follows:

“In suggesting an inner self-awareness as the basis of all knowledge, Descartes had established the dualism which was to remain the underlying belief of all scientific civilization. In effect, he divided us from our bodies, reason from the passions, mind from matter” (56). Although the influence of Descartes is profound, it is the combined influence of a Cartesian view of the universe with Neoplatonism that has secured the body-soul dualism in religious as well as secular minds. As John Henry indicates in *A Short History of Scientific Thought*, “The dualist separation between body and soul fitted in with the dualism of the Platonized Christianity of the Roman Catholic Church” (139). Thus, philosophy, religion, and the precursor of modern science all converged in support of the body-soul dualism that continues to have a major influence on Western civilization.

### ***Conclusion***

The influence of body-soul dualism has been so profound and widespread for so many centuries and even millennia that it seems to have become more of an unconscious cultural assumption than a chosen philosophical or religious commitment. This is why in his essay “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” Berry notes that he and most people struggle with dualism. He summarizes the devastating impact as follows: “In denying the holiness of the body and the so-called physical reality of the world—and in denying support to the good economy, the good work, by which alone Creation can receive due honor—modern Christianity generally has cut itself off from both nature and culture” (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 113). We have come a long way from the natural philosophers of the early modern period who saw connections throughout the cosmos. The result has too often been retreat and abdication rather than engagement and faithful

stewardship of both nature and culture—the lost ground that Berry argues should be reclaimed.

When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus replied “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). Jesus calls his followers to love God with all their being—body and soul. He also said that the second greatest commandment was like unto it, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). It is difficult to conceive of a genuine love for others that is disembodied, especially when it is given opportunity to express itself in tangible ways. The separation of body and soul, of spirit and matter has tremendous negative implications for every facet of life. As has been noted above, some of the greatest philosophers and theologians in the history of humankind have struggled mightily with what it means for humans to have bodies and souls and the connection between the two.

When bodies and the material world are devalued, the Earth and everything in it becomes expendable and not intrinsically valuable except as a source to satisfy human desires in the short-term. In his essay “Health is Membership,” Berry notes that “This dualism inevitably reduces physical reality, and it does so by removing its mystery from it, by dividing it absolutely from what dualistic thinkers have understood as spiritual or mental reality” (*Art of the Commonplace* 148). In this materialistic reductionism, matter in all its forms loses its mystical connection to God and therefore becomes emptied of the deeper meaning imbedded within it. The controlling metaphor of the machine has become dominant in modernity and has reduced the complexity, connectedness, mystery, and meaning of an organic ecosystem into fodder for the industrial grist mill.

Hope for renewal is possible through a recovery of the sacramental imagination, which will be covered in the next chapter. In that chapter, I will indicate how a sacramental view of life is the antithesis and antidote to dualistic ways of thinking. In their fiction, Joyce, O'Connor, and Berry all demonstrate the significant problems associated with this dualism and point beyond it to sacramental ways of seeing the world that can bring about holistic healing.

## Chapter 3

### Recovering the Sacramental Imagination

Having briefly traced the emergence and widespread influence of the body-soul dualism in Western Civilization, in general, and Western forms of Christianity, in particular, the question arises as to what was and is the alternative? This chapter will discuss some aspects of what a sacramental approach to life looks like. It will also provide some historical context regarding sacramental approaches to life that have also been influential in the history of Christianity. How the sacramental tapestry was woven, torn, and could possibly be recovered will be discussed. In addition, this chapter will provide a brief overview of the power of rituals, both sacred and secular, in shaping interior and communal life in a transformative manner. In their fiction, Joyce, O'Connor, and Berry all highlight the predicament of modernity and point to ways of finding meaning and healing through a sacramental approach to life. In this chapter, I will also provide examples from their work that demonstrate how a failure to view the world sacramentally leads to alienation, nihilism, and a destructive approach toward the environment—among the most common aspects of modernity featured in modernist literature.

#### *The Nature of Sacraments*

What are sacraments? The differences between the ways Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and various Protestant denominations view the nature of the sacraments make this a challenging question. Although discussions often focus on the differences in the number and precise nature of sacraments within various Christian traditions, significant commonalities exist regarding the nature of the sacraments and what they do in a more

general sense. Helen Andretta seems to capture the basic concepts well in her article “The Hylomorphic Sacramentalism of ‘Parker’s Back’”<sup>3</sup> when she states: “The sacraments are incarnational in that they require proper matter and form to effect grace . . . [which] flows from God to humankind through matter” (49). The sacraments represent an important means through which God communicates grace to human beings. In the sacraments, the channel of that grace that flows from God exists in those material things that can be comprehended with the senses. As an example, the Eucharist (also known as the Lord’s Supper or Communion), generally viewed as perhaps the most important sacrament by all Christian denominations, engages all five senses: we can see, smell, taste, and touch the wine and bread even as words of consecration and affirmation are heard before, during, and after.

By their very nature, the sacraments place God’s benediction on the material world by affirming that matter, rightly received, can lead one to connect directly with God and His grace. The sacraments refute gnostic and Manichaeian ideas concerning matter; rather than barriers to knowing God, the material world offers a key means to connect with God according to His own terms. After all, God created the material world as well as the spiritual one. In “Understanding the Sacraments of the Orthodox Church,” Thomas Fitzgerald writes, “Most of the sacraments use a portion of the material of creation as an outward and visible sign of God’s revelation . . . The frequent use of the material of creation reminds us that matter is good and can become a medium of the

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<sup>3</sup> Andretta also provides a nice distinction between the words “sacrament” and “sacramental” noting that both are external signs that communicate grace. However, she distinguishes sacraments as sensible perceptible rites instituted by Christ on Earth to confer the supernatural grace it symbolizes and therefore fixed in number (i.e., 7 sacraments of the Catholic Church). Whereas, sacramentals by their nature are innumerable because they span all words, actions, objects, and gestures over all times and places that on the Church’s authority draw on personal dispositions of the individual and the merits and prayers of the whole mystical Body of Christ.

Spirit” (1). Coming at the issue from an Episcopal view, Leonel Mitchell notes that “God used external bodily means, outward and visible signs, to reveal and convey God’s inward and spiritual gifts and graces. We find this pattern of revelation not only in the sacraments but also in the Incarnation, in the Church, and in all that has been created in God’s image” (location 4546). Both of these authors, affirm that through bodily, outward, and sensible manifestations, sacraments are signs that point to and enact spiritual realities.

In this view, matter and spirit cannot be opposed to one another or separated, but must be seen as part of a grand continuum where the visible and invisible are intertwined and mutually affirm one another. The material world is good, able to be a means of grace, and a means to receive spiritual gifts. How does this relate to the writing of fiction? As Flannery O’Connor indicates in *Mystery and Manners*, “the Christian novelist lives in a larger universe. He believes that the natural world contains the supernatural” (175). By revealing this mysterious connection between matter and spirit, the Christian author of fiction performs a sort of sacramental act. As O’Connor goes on to note, “every mystery that reaches the human mind, except in the final stages of contemplative prayer, does so by way of the senses” (176). Sensual means can result in apprehending transcendent realities.

The most important mystery communicated through the sacraments is communion with God. Christianity affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God—a being who is in one sense beyond the comprehension of human minds and at the same time personally and intimately knowable through His self-revelation. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* indicates, the sacraments “manifest and communicate to men, above all



in the Eucharist, the mystery of communion with the God who is love” (1118). The sacraments do not merely provide knowledge of God, they provide profound communion with Him that transcends what words alone can impart. The key word for this relationship as noted above is love. As Fitzgerald indicates, “Not only do the Sacraments disclose and reveal God to us, but they also serve to make us receptive to God. All the Sacraments affect our personal relationship to God and to one another” (1). Beyond the worship service in which they are administered and received, sacraments make an individual receptive to seeing “the spirit of God being ‘present in all places and filling all things’” (Fitzgerald 1). They also effect communion, not only with God, but with other believers, uniting embodied souls with embodied souls.

However, sacraments not only connect believers with God and one another in a particular place and time, they also connect believers across time, in the past, present, and future. In *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry*, Hans Boersma notes that sacramental time “means that past, present, and future can coincide. As a result, people from different historical eras can participate or share in the same event” (124). For example, the Eucharist looks backwards to Christ’s crucifixion (and the Passover, which foreshadowed it), to Christ’s resurrection as a present reality, and to the future hope of the marriage supper of the Lamb with his Church that inaugurates eternity. One liturgical formulation of this concept during the Eucharist is a congregational response of “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.”

Believers participating in the sacraments at any particular place and point in time, are participating in union with God, with one another and those living around the world, saints who have died and gone into glory, and those yet to be born. More will be said

below concerning the power of rituals to unite people together. Exploring the richness of the concept of sacraments is beyond the scope of this thesis, but the discussion above is intended to provide some sense of what sacraments are and how they function in powerful ways to unite people to God, to one another, and ultimately to themselves as they engage their senses and enact with their bodies rituals that strengthen their souls.

***From Sacraments to Sacramental Imagination***

The effects of the Church's sacraments are not intended to end at the door of the church. Rightly understood, the sacraments provide a pattern for seeing the entire cosmos in a certain way. Sacraments remind believers that "God is not detached from His creation . . . God is present and active in our lives and in the creation about us" (Fitzgerald 1). In *For the Life of the World*, Alexander Schmemmann, a theologian of the Orthodox Church, provides a number of helpful insights into how the sacraments of the Church can serve as patterns that impinge on all of life. He argues that "All that exists is God's gift to man, and it all exists to make God known to man, to make man's life communion with God . . . God *blesses* everything He creates . . . He makes all creation the sign and means of His presence and wisdom, love, and revelation" (14). In this passage, Schmemmann beautifully summarizes a sacramental view of the world. According to him, all of creation is intended to bring people into communion with God. Intrinsically, it is good and blessed, but its teleology is closely related to theology—its ultimate purpose is to draw people and all other things into intimate fellowship with God.

This is so important Schmemmann argues because "Man is a hungry being. But he is hungry for God. Behind all the hunger of our life is a hunger for God" (14). As Augustine put it in his *Confessions*, "because you have made us for yourself, and our

heart is restless until it rests in you” (1.1). Both Schmemmann and Augustine conclude that God is the ultimate desire of human beings whether they recognize it or not. Lesser desires point to paralleling ultimate desires. Schmemmann notes that the biblical story of the Fall of Adam and Eve, which is centered on food, “is the image of the world loved for itself alone, and not with God” (16). This primal example illustrates how the world can be received improperly if the gift does not lead one back to the giver. Humans should receive the world and everything in it as gifts from their creator that remind them of His love, yet they should never forget that the greatest gift by far is a vital relationship with Him.

Probably, most people can relate to receiving a material gift from a loved one. No matter how grand the gift and how intrinsically delightful it may be, what is most satisfying is that the tangible expression points beyond itself to an intangible love. Rightly received, the gift points to greater realities and realms of fuller delight. It may and should be enjoyed and appreciated for its intrinsic goodness or beauty as the giver intends, but it should never stop there, if the gift is to fully signify its value and teleological intent.

However, to receive God’s manifold gifts in creation with thanksgiving is never enough for one with a true sacramental imagination, according to Schmemmann. He argues that man is fundamentally a priest who “stands in the center of the world and unifies it in his act of blessing God, of both receiving the world from God and offering it to God—and by filling the world with this eucharist, he transforms his life, the one that he receives from the world into life in God, into communion with Him” (15). Eucharist means thanksgiving. Schmemmann indicates that the priestly role of humans is to gratefully

receive the world as gift from God, but then offer it back to Him in worship, adoration, and thanksgiving.<sup>4</sup>

The gift comes with an ethical responsibility to use it well, to guard and protect it, and to make of it a means of communion with God as well as a means of blessing to His creatures. Johann Sebastian Bach provides a good example of this concept. As Michael White indicates, “A brief look at [Bach’s] manuscripts reveals how every bar and phrase comes saturated in belief, with scribbled markings like ‘JJ’ (for Jesu Jevu: Jesus help me) when he’s struggling with composition problems, and the sign-off ‘SDG’ (for Soli Deo Gloria: only to God the glory) when he sorts them out and makes it to the end” (1). Bach looks to God for inspiration as he seeks to write beautiful music and when he receives it, he offers the completed composition back to God with praise. Bach’s sacramental imagination leads to communion with God in his work; his priestly offering is beautiful music that still resounds to the glory of His creator.

### ***Disenchantment: The Spirit of Modernity***

While Bach exemplifies a sacramental imagination, his way of perceiving the world lies in sharp contrast to the secular worldview of modernity. If Schmemmann sees God everywhere and in everything, “the disenchantment of the world lay right at the

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<sup>4</sup> In much the same way as Wendell Berry, Schmemmann rejects the sacred/secular distinction. He indicates that the only purpose of *For the Life of the World* was to “show, or rather to ‘signify’ that the choice between these two reductions of Christianity—to ‘religion’ and to ‘secularism’—is not the only choice, that in fact it is a false dilemma” (112). He argues that in Christ, “the world in its totality has become again a *liturgy*, a *communion*, an *ascension*” (112). Secularism is false and meaningless and Schmemmann calls it a devastating “‘Christian’ phenomena” caused by returning to the “pre-Christian and fundamentally non-Christian dichotomies of the ‘sacred’ and ‘profane,’ spiritual and material, etc.” (111). With Christ’s death, religion, which is based on a sacred versus secular distinction, is done away with. Schmemmann indicates that priestly offices within the Church are intended to “reveal to each vocation its priestly essence . . . to reveal the Church as the royal priesthood of the redeemed world” (93).

heart of modernity” as Max Weber noted (Jenkins 12). According to Boersma, both modernity and postmodernity are:

predicated on the abandonment of a premodern sacramental mindset in which the realities of this-worldly existence pointed to greater eternal realities in which they sacramentally shared. Once modernity abandoned a participatory or sacramental view of reality, the created order became unmoored from its origin in God, and the material cosmos began its precarious drift on the flux of nihilistic waves. (2)

Boersma points to a sacramental way of seeing the world that pre-dated modernity. He contrasts sacramental views of the world that once anchored humanity in the West with non-participatory views that lead to nihilism. The influence of this anti-sacramentality has pervaded not only the secular realm, but has widely impacted Christianity as well.

Boersma laments that “In many ways, both Protestants *and* Catholics have succumbed to the onslaught of a desacralized modernity” (11).<sup>5</sup> While the sacramental imagination nurtures communion and connection with God, other humans, and the entire cosmos, the secular mindset fosters alienation from everything, including ourselves. As O’Connor indicates “The Manicheans separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter. This is also pretty much the modern spirit” (*Mystery and Manners* 68). Alienation, nihilism, and the destruction of the natural world are the

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<sup>5</sup> Although he sees both Protestants and Catholics as being negatively impacted by the desacralizing influence of modernity, Boersma seems to indicate that Catholics are more likely to have a sacramental mindset. He quotes Andrew Greeley who notes in *The Catholic Imagination* that Catholics ‘live in an enchanted world . . . Catholic paraphernalia [e.g., statues, holy water, stained glass, votive candles, etc.] are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace’ (10). According to Greeley, Catholics tend to emphasize God’s immanence while Protestants accentuate His transcendence.

outcomes of modernity's desacramentalization of the cosmos as, for example, can be seen in lives of one fictional character each from Joyce, O'Connor, and Berry.

Having lost the connection between the material and spiritual, the one thing modern humans share is a profound alienation as poignantly depicted by James Joyce in his short story, "The Dead." After hearing his wife, Gretta, recount the story of a teenage boy who was willing to die from exposure rather than being apart from her when she was also young, "a strange friendly pity for her entered [Gabriel's] soul" (193). Reflecting on this early romance and the death of a young man for Gretta's sake, "It hardly pained him now to think how poor a part he, her husband, had played in her life. He watched her while she slept as though he and she had never lived together as man and wife" (193). Even living closely together in marriage for so many years could not bridge the gap between Gabriel and Gretta. Tears filled Gabriel's eyes as he realized "He had never felt like that himself towards any woman, but he knew that such a feeling must be love" (194). As the snow fell all over Dublin, Gabriel feels the cold blanket of alienation as the one thing that binds together the dead and the living who await death. Yet, alienation is also typically accompanied by nihilism in the modern view of life.

In a letter to her friend "A.," Flannery O'Connor notes that "if you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe" (*Collected Works* 949). One of O'Connor's characters who perhaps best represents the modern nihilistic worldview is Hulga in the short story "Good Country People." Having received a Ph.D. in philosophy, Hulga believes that her education has equipped her to be "one of those people who see *through* to nothing" (287). As a Nietzschean evangelist, she seeks to seduce the young Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, and turn him from what she assumes

are simplistic views held by “good country people” to the realization that “We are all damned . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see. It’s a kind of salvation” (288). If there is no God, then there is no such thing as sin and the need for moral restraint according to Hulga’s nihilistic worldview. For her, salvation is the absolute freedom to do as one wants without feeling guilty about it or being concerned about eternal judgement.

Hulga is convinced that there is no ultimate reality beyond what one can construct for oneself. She seeks to demonstrate her will to power over Pointer through sexual and metaphysical seduction. As Ralph C. Wood indicates, in “Flannery O’Connor, Martin Heidegger, and Modern Nihilism,” “Hulga’s nihilism is not so much an idle habit of mind as a destructive work of the will. Just as she has sought autonomously to reinvent herself—and in giving herself an ugly name, to deny all supernal Beauty and Joy—so must she exercise her nihilist powers upon others . . . she is an evangelist for the gospel that there is no truth except No-truth” (107). In contrast to the “good country people” of the town who she views as simpletons, Hulga believes she is a true genius who can find a way to enlighten Pointer’s inferior mind. After seducing him, she intends to turn the shame she assumes he will experience into a tool to change his way of thinking in accordance with her own antinomian nihilism (284).

However, Hulga’s plans are overturned. After engaging in some foreplay, Pointer convinces her to allow him to remove her prosthetic leg. When Pointer steals her glasses and artificial leg and leaves her stranded in the loft of the barn, she indignantly hisses, “You’re a Christian! . . . You’re a fine Christian! You’re just like them all—say one thing and do another,” Pointer indignantly replies, “I hope you don’t think I believe in that

crap!” (290). As he packs the suitcase with the artificial leg, Pointer tells Hulga, “you ain’t so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!” (291). Although she thought she was the arch-nihilist and Pointer was a naïve, Christian, country boy, she is undercut physically and philosophically by his assertion of the same principles she champions. As Wood notes, “Both literally and figuratively, she has nothing to stand on . . . Pointer knows that to steal Hulga’s mechanical member is to inflict the utmost devastation: to desecrate the very icon of her nihilist faith” (112). Hulga receives the logical outworking of her philosophical conceits. Pointer’s will to power has triumphed over her own. She can accuse Pointer of nothing because he demonstrates that he, rather than she, is the exemplar of the nihilistic mindset she previously advocated.

Rather than being taught a lesson in nihilism, Pointer provides Hulga with painful insight into what her revolt against God and the cosmic order really means. Her comeuppance is accompanied by a profound alienation as she is left trapped in the barn loft, unable to move or see. This is exactly the point where grace could potentially enter into Hulga’s life and remove the blindness she achieved by an act of her will (273). In addition to alienation and nihilism, the modern view of the material world often leads to despoiling it for financial gain.

The contrast between modern and sacramental ways of seeing the world are vividly juxtaposed in Berry’s novel, *Jayber Crow*. The Nest Egg is one of the last remaining stands of old hardwood forest in the fictional Port William community in Kentucky where the story takes place. For many years, the Nest Egg was owned and maintained by the consummate farmer, Athey Keith. Despite the name he gave it, Athey had no intention to turn the beautiful ancient woodland into a means of profit. When



At they died, he left the Nest Egg to his daughter Mattie Keith Chatham who dearly loved it. The town barber, Jayber Crow, has loved Mattie for some time, but she is married to Troy Chatham. However, a chance meeting in the Nest Egg one day leads to many other encounters where Jayber and Mattie enjoy its transcendent beauty together over a period of fourteen or fifteen years.

Jayber and Mattie receive the old forest sacramentally. Jayber summarizes their experiences in the following passage:

Our paths would cross and we would go along a ways together while the season warmed and the leaves unfolded overhead, while the leaves fell or the snow. We walked always in beauty, it seemed to me. We walked and looked about, or stood and looked . . . We did not often speak. The place spoke for us and was a kind of speech. We spoke to each other in the things we saw . . . Sometimes these walks and rooms and vistas seemed arranged for us, for our pleasure. (349-50)

They enjoy the forest and what it contains together and receive it as a precious gift. The birds, animals, plants, trees, light, shadow, and wind are “passing graces” (349).

Jayber said that sometimes they would come into “a place of such loveliness that it stopped us still and held us until some changing in the light seemed to bless us and let us go” (350). For Jayber and Mattie, the Nest Egg is a natural sanctuary full of wonder, delight, and benediction. As I noted in “Finding Eden in Their Backyard: Environmental Enchantment in Rawlings’s *South Moon Under* and Berry’s *Jayber Crow*,” “Jayber and Mattie are soul mates who find enchantment in nature and a deep sense of community. The scene noted above is reminiscent of a return to the Garden of Eden before the Fall”

(80). However, the idyllic experiences are disrupted when Mattie is on her deathbed and no longer able to protect the Nest Egg from her avaricious husband, Troy.

Troy's deeply leveraged approach to farming leaves him desperate as his agricultural house of cards is about to topple. For Troy, the Nest Egg is just another source of income to exploit at will for it has no sacramental significance to him. Troy eschews the old ways of farming under which his father-in-law, Athey, and the land he husbanded had prospered for many years. Athey's commitment to long-term stewardship of the land is contrasted with Troy's desire to extract all he could for himself with no thought for what it takes for the Earth to thrive and endure for generations to come.

One day Jayber heard a loud commotion of chainsaws, engines, and crashing. He ran to the Nest Egg and was appalled to find that it had been cleared off with a bulldozer. "Tremendous logs were lying there, side by side" and made Jayber think of "beached whales, great living creatures heaved out of their elements at last" (359). With a big grin, Troy summoned Jayber over and said "You've got to see it to believe it, don't you?" (359). The old forest had grown for hundreds of years, but modern machinery was able to wipe it out in hours. It is hard to imagine a greater illustration of desecration. The barren land left in Troy's wake, is symbolic of the emptiness of his soul. The disenchantment and desacralization of modernity leads to alienation not only from other people and God, but from the Earth as well. By way of contrast, rituals can have a powerful influence for good in recapturing the sacramental imagination.

### ***The Role of Ritual Bodies in Reconstituting the Sacramental Imagination***

From its inception, Christianity has held a deep ambivalence about the body. Although the incarnation, resurrection and ascension of Christ, and his promise of

resurrection and eternal life in a new heavens and new Earth for all believers would presumably represent the greatest imaginable benediction on the body, Christianity has generally viewed the corporeal nature of humans with skepticism, suspicion and anxiety. Despite this tendency, worship in the western and eastern branches of the Christian church remained replete with ritual practices that affirmed the importance of bodily participation in the liturgy up until the early sixteenth century. Unfortunately, prior to that time, worship had also degraded in many ways to a clerical performance that was generally observed by a spectating laity, most of whom could not understand the Latin service.

The Reformation in Western Europe brought much needed renewal as well as schism.<sup>6</sup> Sweeping changes in theological understanding led to a reevaluation of worship practices, which led to varying degrees of transformation depending on the branch of Protestantism. The emphasis on biblical preaching focused attention on the mind as the primary means for knowing God. Rich ritual was thrown out in many cases, leaving a liturgical environment that made the laity more active participants verbally and aurally, but less involved bodily. The diminution of ritual and sacramentality have driven the body-soul dualism much deeper in the collective Protestant psyche with deleterious impacts that impact all of life. Religious reform often leads to over correction. Recovery of ritual practice in some Protestant traditions where it has become anemic is a

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<sup>6</sup> In his preface to *Recovering the Historic Ministry and Worship of Reformed Protestantism*, Terry L. Johnson notes that “There was a broad consensus in Renaissance Christendom that the worship of the late medieval church was in need of reform. The ordinary services of the Lord’s Day were conducted in Latin, an unknown tongue to most people . . . Preaching at the end of the fifteenth century, says Bruno Bürki, a scholar of the Swiss Reformed Church, ‘was generally in a decadent state.’ It had lost touch with the biblical text and ‘was drowning in hagiographical tales and moral recommendations and took delight in artificial scholastic distinctions.’ There was little prayer and monastic choirs handled the signing . . . The congregation was passive, the mass was unintelligible, and the cup was withheld from the laity.”

fundamental way that churches can reconnect the body with the soul for the good of their members, the Church and the world.

Following the Reformation, the beginning of which is commonly associated with the publication of Martin Luther's "95 Theses" in 1517, embodied rituals gave way to an increasing focus on the primacy of the mind in Protestant worship to varying or lesser degrees depending on the specific expression of Protestantism.<sup>7</sup> The Anabaptists were the most radical in jettisoning rituals associated with the Catholic Church while Anglicans retained more of the old ritual forms while adopting significant doctrinal changes. Zwinglians, Calvinists, and Lutherans constituted a continuum of emphasis on ritual practice somewhere in between. Although the reformers continued to emphasize the importance of baptism and the Lord's Supper, restored participation by the laity in the Eucharistic cup, and reinvigorated congregational singing, the number of sacraments in Protestant churches was generally reduced from seven to two. In addition, the emphasis on embodied and sensual aspects of worship was often diminished as either a distraction or idolatry.

While not denying the good intentions of the Reformers who rightly criticized superstitious and magical views of ritual, James K. A. Smith describes the "Frankensteinish" outcomes as:

a dis-embodiment of spiritual life that reduced 'true religion' to 'right belief.' The eventual result was a complete reconfiguration of worship and devotion. Christian

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<sup>7</sup> Boersma notes that "the Protestant Reformation was part of a shift that had been in the making for centuries, and of which the desacramentalizing of the cosmos was the most significant feature" (11). However, he indicates that the desacramentalizing of the cosmos had its origins long before the Reformation. As noted above, he also contends that both Catholics and Protestants have been negatively impacted by the desacralization of modernity.

worship was no longer a full-orbed exercise that recruited the body and touched all of the senses. Instead, Protestants designed worship as if believers were little more than brains-on-a-stick.<sup>8</sup> The primary target was the mind; the primary means was a lecture-like sermon; and the primary goal was to deposit the right doctrines and beliefs into our heads so that we could then go out into the world to carry out the mission of God. (“Redeeming Ritual” 2)

On one hand, the Reformers emphasis on preaching sermons from the Bible in the vernacular of the people so that those who did not know Latin could understand was a positive development, which was eventually widely adopted by the Catholic Church as well. On the other hand, the emphasis on mentally receiving Biblical truth by preaching and teaching led to a decrease in the prominence of bodily engagement in rituals in most Protestant denominations. The underlying assumption seems to be that what the body does is far less important than what engages the mind, which is assumed to be more closely aligned with the soul.<sup>9</sup>

In this approach, right ethics and worldview are seen as the results of right thinking. The problem is that “we are not created as brains-on-a-stick; we are created as embodied, tactile, visceral creatures who are more than cognitive processors or belief machines. As full-fledged imagebearers of God, our center of gravity is located as much in our bodies as in our minds. This is precisely why the body is the way to our heart”

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<sup>8</sup> The Reformers over emphasis on the mind and rational ways of knowing may have presaged the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the ascendance of empirical science as *the* way of apprehending “objective” truth. In general, narrative, poetic, metaphorical, and ritualistic ways of meaning making have taken a back seat in modernity.

<sup>9</sup> In *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor*, Smith notes that much of contemporary Protestantism reflects what philosopher Charles Taylor described as a process of ‘excarnation.’ As Smith notes, the religion that conceives of God as an impersonal deity who orders the cosmos is also “de-Communionized, de-ritualized, and disembodied” (58). Smith’s insightful critique comes from within Protestantism.

(Smith, “Redeeming Ritual” 2). In their zeal to recover the truths of scripture and to impress them on the minds of all believers, the Reformers seemed to generally view ritual as a barrier rather than an aid to worshipping in spirit and in truth. Unfortunately, during times of spiritual reformation, reactions to what has gone wrong can lead to overcorrections where the proverbial baby is thrown out with the bath water.

This was all the easier given the underlying body-soul dualism that has plagued Christianity throughout its history in ways as diverse as Gnosticism, asceticism, monasticism and mysticism. Philosophical ideas like those of Plato and religious ideas like those of Mani have also undoubtedly had an influence as noted in the previous chapter. The scriptures that the Reformers sought to understand afresh also contain some apparent ambiguity as to whether the body should be viewed positively or negatively.

In order to understand the deleterious impacts of the diminution of the body in worship within the majority of Protestant churches, it is important to understand the significance of ritual in the lives of believers in any faith tradition. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Catherine Bell analyzes various theories of ritual and explores the strategies by which ritual activities constitute a culturally strategic way of acting in the world. Bell notes that French sociologist, social psychologist and philosopher, Emile Durkheim, argued that:

religion is composed of beliefs and rites: beliefs consist of representations of the sacred; rites are determined modes of action that can be characterized only in terms of the representations of the sacred that are their object. ‘Between these two classes of facts,’ he wrote, ‘there is all the difference which separates thought and action.’ . . . [Durkheim] reintroduces ritual as the means by which collective

beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced and affirmed as real by the community. Hence, ritual is the means by which individual perception and behavior are socially appropriated and conditioned. (20)

Ritual plays the vital role of integrating the dichotomy of thought and action, of worldview and ethos, into a coherent whole.<sup>10</sup>

Whether looking at ritual in religion, society or culture, it is consistently seen by theorists as “a mechanistically discrete and paradigmatic means of sociocultural integration, appropriation, or transformation” (Bell 16). Thus, from a religious perspective, ritual sets believers off and distinguishes them as part of a particular community of faith, it enables them to internalize a particular way of seeing the world, and it shapes the social imaginaries and desires of the participants in ways that change how they interact with one another and the world.

Although practices like sitting, kneeling and standing during worship may seem rather inconsequential, they are actually fraught with life changing significance. As Bell notes:

[For Pierre] Bourdieu<sup>11</sup> nothing less than a whole cosmology is instilled with the words ‘stand up straight!’ [Roy] Rappaport makes a similar point in describing how the act of kneeling does not so much communicate a message about

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<sup>10</sup> In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson suggest that: 1) the metaphors we live by are partially preserved in ritual; 2) cultural metaphors and the values entailed by them are propagated by ritual; and 3) ritual forms an indispensable part of the experiential basis of our cultural metaphorical systems—there can be no culture without ritual (234). They argue that “Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature” (3) and “Religious rituals are typically metaphorical kinds of activities” (234). Rituals, both sacred and secular, coherently structure and unify our experience (234).

<sup>11</sup> Smith draws heavily on expositions of French theorists Bourdieu and Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the first half of *Imagining the Kingdom* where he lays the foundations for a liturgical anthropology.

subordination as it generates a body identified with subordination. In other words, the molding of the body within a highly structured environment does not simply express inner states. Rather, it primarily acts to restructure bodies in the very doing of the acts themselves. Hence, required kneeling does not merely *communicate* subordination to the kneeler. For all intents and purposes, kneeling produces a subordinated kneeler in and through the act itself . . . what we see in ritualization is not the mere display of subjective states or corporate values. Rather, we see an act of production—the production of a ritualized agent able to wield physically a scheme of subordination or insubordination. (99-100)

Contrary to the body-soul dualism, such theoreticians acknowledge the manner in which the ritualized body shapes how one thinks, desires, and acts.

In worship, ritual actions that in and of themselves contain a whole cosmology are joined together and organized through liturgies that tell a grand metanarrative. Liturgies capture the imaginations and the hearts of worshippers by making them actors in a glorious story that encompasses all of life. In his book, *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): How Worship Works*, Smith captures this idea as follows:

our action emerges from how we imagine the world . . . shaping of our character is, to a great extent, the effect of stories that have captivated us, that have sunk into our bones—stories that ‘picture’ what we think life is about, what constitutes ‘the good life.’ We live into the stories we’ve absorbed; we become characters in the drama that captivated us. Thus, much of our action is acting out a kind of script that has unconsciously captured our imagination precisely because narrative



trains our emotions, and those emotions actually condition our perception of the world. (32)

After withdrawing from the rest of the world to reenact a microcosm of their unique cosmological story in their bodies through the rituals of worship each week, worshippers reemerge as actors who take the divine drama back into world.

For Christians, the story is both historical (beginning with the creation of the world by God in Genesis) and eschatological (extending to the new heavens and the new Earth in Revelation) while centered on the redemptive work of Christ, which extends not only to souls, but bodies as well. From the Garden of Eden to the renewed cosmos, God's plan of having his image bearers spread throughout the Earth remains the same. Having had their souls and bodies shaped through the service of worship, practitioners of ritual seek to engage and transform the world according to the grand script that has sunk deep into their subconscious and conscious selves—that has sunk into their bones as Smith puts it.

In order to better understand how this works, it is helpful to consider Smith's argument that humans are above all creatures of desire rather than primarily rational animals. As such, they are more influenced by the imagination than the intellect. They “live off of stories, narratives, images, and the stuff of *poiesis*” (*Imagining the Kingdom* xii).<sup>12</sup> This is why ritually *de minimis* worship that focuses primarily on the mind and

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<sup>12</sup> Smith develops this concept in detail in *Desiring the Kingdom*, which is the first book in what he intended to be a Cultural Liturgies trilogy and of which *Imagining the Kingdom* is the second volume. The triumph of scientific rationalism and its deleterious impacts on Western society is brilliantly traced by Bryan Appleyard in *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man*. In general, narrative, poetic, metaphorical, and ritualistic ways of meaning making have taken a back seat in modernity. If Smith is correct and humans are primarily desiring animals (who make sense of their lives by enacting stories) rather than rational animals, then the triumph of scientific rationalism is deeply problematic.

fails to give the body with all of the senses its place misses the mark. If our center of gravity is located as much in our bodies as in our minds and the body is the way to the heart, then it is of utmost importance that rituals are appreciated as conduits of grace that inscribe themselves in the body (Smith “Redeeming Ritual” 2).

Evan Zeusse begins his “Meditation on Ritual” by noting the strong anti-ritual prejudice in the Western Christianity based on certain New Testament emphases, which were intensified by the Protestant Reformation. He notes that:

When we engage ourselves in a ritual act . . . there can be discerned more general assumptions operating on a pre-conscious level. Here ritual is also ‘doing something’ both to us and to our world . . . ritual is *action*. It engages our bodies and gives them a dignity on a much more immediate level than any myth can, no matter how affirmative it may be about the bodily life . . . Ritual so affirms the body gesture that it becomes the vehicle for conveying and embodying the highest symbolic truths. (518)

Given Christianity’s longstanding ambivalence toward the body and the manner in which modern technology seems to deprecate the significance of corporeality, it is vitally important that Christians understand and embrace ritual as an anchor for affirming the body.

Ritual not only situates the body as significant in the vast universe, its effect extends into the minutiae of everyday life, sanctifying and interconnecting all things as it demonstrates that the “secular is infused with the sacred” (Zeusse 521). Although ritual forms sacred connections between humans and the world, its greatest power is in its ability to unite participants with all their differences into a new humanity.

Zeusse explains how this works: “When several people enter into a ceremony together, their coordinate gestures, words, and song reflect and project a world, constituting a structured environment. Through this they are enabled to share meanings, and to take up positions in regard to each other within and sustaining the same world . . . In ritual ‘true personhood’ and ‘true community’ are rediscovered” (522). Enactment of rituals together affirms a shared worldview and humanity that overshadows a multitude of differences. As Zeusse states, “To join in ritual together is to affirm the reality of the other person and his importance for the cosmos” (529). Enactment of rituals with other believers is both deeply ethical and egalitarian; the ritual relationship de-objectifies others and transforms the I-It relationship into the I-Thou (Zeusse 525). To a great extent, differences based on age, race, gender, nationality, education and socio-economic status also become imperceptible as ritual acts are performed together.

Worship that is replete with ritual has a powerful ability to orient and order all of life. If there is any hope that Christianity will be able to overcome the pernicious effects of the body-soul dualism that has perpetually plagued it, the answer lies in recovery of embodied worship that is able to transform how one imagines and interacts with God, one another, the world and themselves. Sociologists like Durkheim, Rappaport, Bourdieu, and Bell have demonstrated the fundamental and transformative power of embodied rituals in shaping how communities are formed and how people interact with one another and the world. Theologians like Smith and Zeusse indicate how embodied religious rituals shape the individual and collective imaginary of people in ways that merely listening to a sermon could never accomplish. Embodied worship allows for a shared participation in

patterns that have prodigious impacts on how one interacts with others and how one engages the world.

*How the Tapestry of Sacramental Imagination was Woven and Torn Asunder*

In *Heavenly Participation*, Boersma seeks to trace the history of how a premodern sacramental mindset developed in the West, how it was ultimately lost, and how it might be recovered in the present. He summarizes the sacramental mindset as one in which “the realities of this-worldly existence pointed to greater, eternal realities in which they sacramentally shared” (2). He views this as a participation in heavenly realities while on Earth; life on Earth takes on a heavenly dimension (5). In practical and ethical terms, this means that “the moral lives of Christians on earth are to reflect this heavenly participation . . . paradoxically, only otherworldliness guarantees proper engagement in this world” (5). Boersma clarifies that he is not arguing that this language of heavenly participation is intended to diminish, disparage, or downplay earthly concerns. Instead, he quotes Schmemmann and argues that “The purpose of all matter . . . is to lead us into God’s heavenly presence, to bring about communion with God, participation in the divine life . . . The entire cosmos is meant to serve as sacrament: a material gift from God in and through which we enter into the joy of his heavenly presence” (9). Thus, Boersma’s view of what the sacramental imagination entails is consistent with the manner in which it was described earlier in this chapter.

According to Boersma, a Platonic-Christian synthesis lies at the heart of the sacramental imagination. He indicates that Augustine, along with “nearly all Christian theologians prior to modernity . . . was convinced that the Christian faith is about heavenly participation and that this biblical insight allows for some kind of Platonic-

Christian synthesis” (7). The appeal of Neoplatonism to theologians across the centuries, according to Boersma, was its view of cosmos preceding out from God and returning to Him (5). He argues that both Protestant and Catholic Christians need to reengage with the Platonist-Christian synthesis to recover the sacramental mindset.

In Chapter 2, I noted some potential concerns about this synthesis. I think that Augustine and others who adopted the Platonic-Christian synthesis were correct in seeing that everything in creation was intended to point people back to God, the Creator. However, I argue that Augustine was so concerned about quickly climbing the Neoplatonic ladder to God and not being glued to material things that he was reluctant to fully receive the material world as God’s love gift. It seems to me that Augustine’s asceticism was wrongly rooted in Plotinus’s worries about the dangers of being too captivated by earthly things. I do not deny that one could become too captivated by the material world as an end in itself such that it would lose its sacramental ontology. Instead, I argue for the grateful receipt of the material gifts of creation as intrinsically good love gifts from God that should be given back to God with love, gratitude, and worship. Citing Augustine, Boersma contends that “while we may use this good created order, only the triune God . . . is to be enjoyed. Only he can be loved strictly *for his own sake*” (30). Here I disagree with Boersma.

According to the book of Genesis in the Bible, when God had finished all of His creative work, He declared it very good. He built intrinsic goodness into it and was pleased with His own handiwork. His artistry reflects His glory. If we delight in His works, would that not please Him? Would not Bach want us to enjoy hearing his Brandenburg Concertos even as they point to God as the source of everything true, good,

and beautiful? These things are not mutually exclusive, but mutually supportive when rightly received. In I Timothy 6:17, the Apostle Paul tells those who are rich not to trust in their riches, but in God who “richly provides everything for our enjoyment.” I am concerned that Boersma’s approach, like Augustine’s, still results in an unhealthy ambivalence about the material world. While I agree that a materialistic understanding that unhinges the goodness of creation from the Creator is problematic, I argue that those who receive the world sacramentally may legitimately enjoy the gift and the giver at the same time.

I do, however, concur with Boersma that a sense of mystery is fundamental to a sacramental worldview. He argues that until the late Middle Ages (around the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries), people perceived of the world as charged with mystery in the sense that there were realities behind the mere appearance of things that one could observe with the senses. With this understanding, “Even the most basic created realities that we observe as human beings carry an extra dimension . . . The created world cannot be reduced to measurable, manageable dimensions” (21) The disenchantment of the modern world is such that mystery is lost because the materialism of modernity reduces everything to matter and motion. Conversely, Boersma notes that “A sacramental ontology insists that not only does the created world point to God as its source and ‘point of reference,’ but that it also subsists or participates in God” (24). The ability to provide scientific explanations of the chemistry and physics of a material thing can never denude it of mystery because it participates in God who is never fully comprehensible.

All sensible things, including humans, participate in God. The vital connection of everything to God also implies a vital mystical connection of each person to everything

else in creation. This was generally the pre-modern sensibility as noted in Chapter 2. As Boersma indicates, it is also the basis for “avoid[ing] our culture’s denigration of the human body and of the environment” (32). Healthy ideas about how to treat the body and the environment flow from the following understanding: 1) God made all things intrinsically good, they reflect His glory, He delights in His Creation, and everything He made is intended to point people back to Him; 2) God is present in and continually upholds the cosmos and everything in it; and 3) because humans and everything else participate in God, they are also intimately connected to one another.

The ethical imperative that arises from this sacramental view of the world is that we should receive all things as gifts from God with gratitude, humility, respect, love, confraternity, and a deep sense of responsibility and stewardship. Rightly having received, we then give back all that He has given to us as Eucharistic offering; sometimes transformed by our vocations, sometimes merely enjoyed with praise. Any other response becomes a demeaning act of desecration as Berry often decries in his essays.

Boersma argues that Christians by and large rejected the excesses of the Platonic worldview, which could not perceive of matter as inherently good and remained suspicious of the material order. He indicates that “Christians, throughout the church’s tradition, celebrated matter and particularly celebrated the body, as good gifts of the Creator God” (34). This may be a generally accurate characterization of the Christian tradition preceding modernity. However, as noted in Chapter 1, Gnosticism and other forms of dualism have been a temptation for the Church since its inception. Yet, the sacraments and a sacramental way of perceiving the world seemed much more common up through the medieval period. However, changes began to take place in the High and

late Middle Ages. Boersma references mid-twentieth century French Catholic theologians of the *nouvelle théologie* movement to trace the breakdown of the sacramental worldview. They point to two major theological developments in the late Middle Ages that ultimately led to a desacramentalizing of the universe: the rise of univocity and nominalism.

The first issue revolved around the nature of the being of God and everything else. The doctrine of analogy of being received its classical formulation under Thomas Aquinas (1225 – 1274 C.E.). Because God is so much greater than humans can comprehend, Thomas argued that we can only understand God's being in terms of analogy. A distinction was made between God's being and that of His creatures. Boersma summarized the distinction as follows: "created being is simply of the borrowed kind; created being is being only because by grace it participates in the existence of God. Only of God can we say that there is no distinction between essence and existence and that the two completely overlap" (73). The being of the created order was intimately tied to the being of the Creator.

Duns Scotus (c. 1265-1308 C.E.) disagreed and argued that the idea of analogous being did not make sense. For Scotus, to say that God exists and created objects exist was to say the same thing. In other words, all being is being in the same sense. In philosophical terms, all being is univocal in character. Boersma quotes James K. A. Smith's summary of Scotus's views: 'both the Creator and creatures exist in the same way or in the same sense. Being, now, becomes a category that is unhooked from participation in God and is a more neutral or abstract qualifier that is applied *to* God and creatures in the same way' (74). With Scotus, created things could have their existence



independent from God and were not dependent for their being on a participation in God's being. This "renders the created order independent from God" (76) and thus undercuts the idea of sacramental participation of all things in God. Thus, the "secular" order has a separate existence from the supernatural order; a philosophical bifurcation that did not previously exist.

Boersma contends that the second blade of the scissors that severed the sacramental tapestry was the nominalism wielded by William of Ockham (c. 1288-c. 1347). The Christian tradition prior to the late Middle Ages considered that universals were real. As Boersma summarizes Ockham's views: "The tradition that followed Ockham insisted that universals are simply names (*nomina*) that we apply to individual objects that happen to look alike. Hence the term 'nominalism' for the philosophical position that universals do not have real existence in the mind of God but are simply names that we assign to particular objects" (80). Ockham posited that one should explain observations by making as few assumptions as possible (the formulation that became known as "Ockham's Razor"). Since there was no reason to assume universals exist, one should not. The severing of universals (analogous to the Platonic Forms) that cannot be observed from the phenomenal world once again provided a way to cut the supernatural off from the natural. This separation of the natural and supernatural world into distinct orders severed the sacramental understanding of the relationship between God and His creation.

Although Boersma sees the sacramental tapestry as being torn prior to the Reformation, he laments that the attempt to rejoin the natural with the supernatural during the Reformation was not successful. While he believes that the Reformation brought both

gains and losses, Boersma contends that overall the Reformation is something to be lamented rather than celebrated because of the split in the unity of the Church. He notes that “younger evangelicals may even question the balance of Reformation theology and may sense that the centrality of the Word and of Christian doctrine has unnecessarily downgraded the Eucharist and led to an unfortunate devaluation of liturgical imagination, as expressed in sacred art and colored vestments, in the smells of incense and the flickering of candles” (86). He argues that the sacramental tapestry had mostly functioned on a subconscious level through stories, symbols, and ritual practices that “conveyed the unity of nature and the supernatural in a harmoniously woven tapestry” (86). Again the importance of rituals, narratives, and metaphor in shaping desires and worldview and for creating harmony between the physical world and transcendent immaterial realities is emphasized.

As indicated above, the Reformation gains in terms of an emphasis on understanding the Bible was often accompanied by a diminution of bodily ritual that hindered recovery of the sacramental imagination. These negative influences were compounded by developments in society outside the Church that also devalued narrative and metaphorical ways of apprehending truth and meaning. The importance of recovering the sacramental imagination and how it might be done is probably best illustrated in rich and compelling stories like that of “Babette’s Feast.”

### ***Babette’s Sacramental Feast***

The power of a sacramental imagination to transform lives is beautifully illustrated in the movie “Babette’s Feast” (1987). Driven from her homeland in France, Babette finds refuge in the home of two unmarried sisters, Martina and Phillipa, who live

on the coast of Jutland in Denmark. The sisters are part of a small, conservative religious sect of which their father was the founding pastor. Based on its religious principles, the congregation eschews worldly pleasures that they think might distract them from their religious devotion in favor of a simple, meager, and generally solemn existence that is highlighted by austere worship services. As Boersma notes, “ascetic practices . . . have made people lose their vision of a life that is true, good, and beautiful” (170). After she arrives, Babette assumes the role of cook and housekeeper, preparing the simple food that they were accustomed to. The sisters and others in the small religious community have no idea that Babette was formerly one of the greatest and most renowned chefs in Paris.

When Babette wins the Paris lottery with a ticket purchased for her by a friend, she decides to use all of her winnings of 10,000 francs to create the kind of sumptuous feast that she previously prepared as a chef in the best restaurant in Paris. Sparing no expense, she orders the most delectable food and wine available and has it shipped from France. As the twelve<sup>13</sup> guests enter for dinner, they find the table set with fine china, crystal, linens, and candles. Their perplexity as to how to receive such elaborate elegance is apparent on their faces. Babette prepares course after course of elaborate and delicious cuisine and vintage wines that she serves to the wary men and women of her adopted community and a general officer who once courted one of the daughters.

At first, the guests are concerned and tentative about the propriety of eating such luxurious, rich, and delicious food. They seem to have a pact that they will not enjoy it

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<sup>13</sup> The number of guests here seems to be a clear allusion to the Last Supper of Jesus with his disciples. However, the guest from outside the religious community, the general, acts as a sort of prophet. One does not get the impression that the general is particularly religious, but his interactions with the world make him able to fully appreciate the magnificence of the meal and to articulate something of its almost miraculous significance. It seems that he is inspired to understand deep spiritual truths conveyed through the meal as a revelation of the true meaning of words he had previously only heard and perhaps not fully understood; an example of epiphany.

too much, which would presumably be sinful. Yet, as they begin to eat and drink, they experience a wonderful conviviality and joy. Old grudges and grievances that had torn relationships for years begin to be healed as they fellowship with one another over the wonderful feast. The material things of life that they held in deep suspicion as a temptation against their pursuit of piety were transformed into good gifts that unite them to one another and to God.

Babette gives all she has of her money and considerable culinary skill to be a blessing to the community that welcomed her in her destitution. The gifts are received with gratitude and have their transforming effect on individual lives and the community together. As Boersma notes, “Babette paradoxically initiates the community into a life of joyous sacramental participation . . . but also throws into disarray their engrained asceticism” (171). Amazed to be served a magical dish of stuffed quail in puff pastry just as good as he had eaten at the Café Anglais in Paris, the visiting General Löwenhielm recalls that when he and other officers ate there together another general remarked that the female chef (who we later learn was Babette) had the ability to ‘transform a dinner into a kind of love affair that made no distinction between bodily appetite and spiritual appetite’ (171). Babette had taken the good gifts of God, transformed them into a magnificent feast through her culinary artistry and imagination, and offered them back as a loving sacrifice for the blessing of the assembled guests and the glory of God. Though she had no money, Babette noted that an artist can never be poor. A more poignant depiction of a sacramental approach to life is difficult to imagine.

## *Conclusion*

Sacraments are material and sensual means by which God communicates grace to believers. By their nature, they affirm the goodness of creation and the ability of material things to connect people to God, to one another, and to the world. The sacraments within the church are examples of rituals enacted with the body that have a transformative impact on the soul. Through metaphor, they enact metanarratives that are intended to serve as a paradigm that impacts all of life. The sacraments within the Church are the pattern by which believers are trained to experience God in every facet of the cosmos.

Developing a sacramental imagination involves receiving material things as love gifts from God that are intended to be enjoyed and to lead people to Himself as the greatest gift, the source of everything true, good, and beautiful. However, the sacramental imagination does not stop at receiving gifts from God, it enables one to give themselves back to God, to others, and to the world. Through a combination of many factors, the prevalence of the sacramental imagination, has diminished greatly, especially since the late Middle Ages. The void left by the loss of the sacramental imagination in modernity has been filled by alienation, nihilism, and a pillaging of the Earth.

Whether or not a sacramental approach to life is restored has tremendous ethical and societal implications. The sacramental imagination is the antithesis of dualisms between body and soul and matter and spirit that dominate our culture inside and outside of the Church. To recapture a sacramental way of seeing is essential to human flourishing—to reconnecting people to the world, to one another, to the divine, to meaning, and ultimately to themselves.

In the next six chapters, I will seek to demonstrate how three modern authors, James Joyce, Flannery O'Connor, and Wendell Berry, used sacramental imagery in their fiction. These authors were chosen to represent three different religious viewpoints: one secular (Joyce), one Catholic (O'Connor), and one Protestant (Berry). There will be two chapters per author. The first of each pair of chapters will seek to synthesize and summarize the author's sacramental approach based on what they say and what critics say about their work. In those chapters, I will develop arguments that seek to illuminate the author's unique approach to sacramental imagery and why they chose to use that approach as part of their oeuvre.

In the second pair of chapters for each author, I will demonstrate in detail how they use sacramental imagery through a close reading of one specific fictional work. In the concluding chapter, I will seek to compare and contrast their differing approaches to evaluate similarities and differences, and to develop a more general theory concerning the use of sacramental imagery in fictional works as well as how such an approach might address the cultural ills associated with body-soul dualism and provide a more fruitful way of seeing and relating to the world.

## Chapter 4

### **The Artist as Priest: Transmuting the Daily Bread of Experience into Everliving Life**

#### **James Joyce**

In a 1939 BBC radio broadcast, Winston Churchill famously indicated that he could not forecast Russia's actions at the beginning of World War II because "It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." This also seems like an apt description of some of the novels of James Joyce (1882-1941). Having enjoyed the relative clarity of Joyce's semi-autobiographical novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), I was initially quite befuddled as I moved from the shore where the young artist had his epiphany in *Portrait* and waded into the deeper and cloudier waters of *Ulysses* (1922). In regards to Russia's intentions in World War II, Churchill perceived a potential key: Russian self-interest. In searching for a key to help unlock the enigma of *Ulysses* and its esoteric treasures, to my surprise, I discovered sacramental imagery in the masterpiece of an author that is widely viewed as secular.

Joyce grew up in a Roman Catholic family in the predominantly Catholic city of Dublin, Ireland and attended Jesuit schools from the time he was six-and-a-half years old. Though he is generally viewed as having renounced the Roman Catholic faith as a teenager, debates remain about his relationship to the Church and his spirituality. However, it seems clear that Joyce's writing was deeply influenced by his Catholic upbringing and education. One prominent way in which this appears is his use of sacramental imagery in works like *Portrait of the Artist*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegan's Wake* (1939). In fact, it can be argued that what are widely viewed as his greatest novels were

significantly structured by sacramental allusions and the sacraments of the Catholic Church.

In this chapter, I will seek to engage with the critical conversation regarding Joyce's spirituality and the sacramental allusions in his works of fiction. Beginning with a discussion of Joyce's spirituality and the debate among critics as to the influence Catholicism had on his literary imagination, I will then demonstrate how sacramental imagery significantly structures *Portrait of the Artist*. From there, I will move on to show how the epiphanies that are so prominent in Joyce's fiction are trans-secular events that connect the mundane to the transcendent in a sacramental fashion.

Prior to concluding this chapter, I will seek to illustrate that Joyce is an earthy artist who embraces embodiment. Joyce's employment of the genres of grotesque realism and Mennipean satire in *Ulysses* are intended to degrade the spiritual. However, his purpose in bringing the spiritual low is to reunite it with the body and the Earth in a way that leads to a resurrection of life in all its fullness. This is the way in which Joyce fulfills his ideal of the artist as priest of the eternal imagination. Understanding Joyce's use of sacramental imagery is key to apprehending his views of his artistic work. This chapter will be immediately followed by a close reading of *Ulysses* in order to give more specific examples of how sacramental imagery was prominently featured in Joyce's fiction and its purpose in fulfilling his artistic aspirations.

### ***Secular or Spiritual Artist?***

In order to understand the why and how of Joyce's use of sacramental imagery, it should be helpful to understand something of his spiritual outlook. There are certainly differences of opinion regarding this issue. In *Help My Unbelief: James Joyce &*



*Religion*, Geert Lernout seeks to demonstrate that “Joyce was an unbeliever from the start of his life as a writer, that he never returned to the faith of his fathers and that his work can only be read properly if this important fact is taken into account” (2). By contrast, in *Catholic Nostalgia in Joyce and Company*, Mary Lowe-Evans argues that “Joyce was inescapably possessed by the religion that ushered him into the world. I will advance this argument, emphasizing Joyce’s redemption of his Catholic past . . . My reading produces a Joycean oeuvre less subversive and more re-productive of the Catholic theological system than recent critiques have noted” (9). Both of the authors noted above summon evidence to advance their particular point of view regarding Joyce’s spirituality or lack thereof. Both quote Joyce himself in making their arguments.

Lernout cites an excerpt from a letter Joyce wrote to Nora Barnacle in 1904, the year that he met her (Nora and Joyce had two children and she later became his wife): “Six years ago I left the Catholic Church, hating it most fervently. I found it impossible for me to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature. I made secret war upon it when I was a student and declined to accept the positions it offered me. By doing this I made myself a beggar but I retained my pride. Now I make war upon it by what I write and say and do” (206). Based on the time reference given, Joyce would have repudiated the Catholic faith when he was approximately 16 years old. The language he uses to describe his relationship to the Church in the quotation above is obviously strident and combative. Lernout contends that Joyce’s antagonism toward the Catholic Church lasted until his death. As one piece of evidence he cites a passage quoted from the biography of Joyce written by Richard Ellmann, which indicates that when Nora was approached by a

Catholic priest about doing a religious service for her husband, she replied ‘I couldn’t do that to him’ (6).

From Lernout’s perspective, “even a cursory examination of Joyce’s letters shows that in correspondence with family and good friends, he frequently and crudely expressed his lack of religious belief” (102). However, Lernout does indicate that there was at least a period of time in which Joyce became interested in Theosophy. The Oxford English Dictionary online summarizes Theosophy as follows: “Any of a number of philosophies maintaining that a knowledge of God may be achieved through spiritual ecstasy, direct intuition, or special individual relations, especially the movement founded in 1875 as the Theosophical Society by Helena Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott.” Lernout notes that Theosophy and other forms of spiritualism became fashionable among the avant-garde artists and intellectuals of Europe who “were turning away from scientific materialism towards a new spiritualism” (90). Joyce may have been looking for a new spiritual synthesis, which was more in keeping with his own beliefs.

As Lernout indicates, “In the twenties, Joyce himself must have thought that the spiritualist movement had been important enough to the writing of *Ulysses* because he told Stuart Gilbert to read a number of strange books [e.g., William Blake, Blavatsky, A. P. Sinnett’s *Esoteric Buddhism*] in preparation for Gilbert’s study of the novel” (92). Therefore, Joyce’s apparent rejection of Roman Catholic faith does not mean he did not have an interest in spiritual concerns. Lernout notes that Michael Paul Gallagher, an Irish Jesuit, published an article on “The Atheism of James Joyce” in *Doctrine and Life* on the centenary of Joyce’s birth in 1982 in which he argued that Joyce’s atheism was ‘more of the anti-church variety than denial of God’s presence,’ such that his negative response to

religion was ‘mostly a matter of negative reaction to his experience of church-forms of faith’ (8). A rejection of the Roman Catholic expression of faith, does not imply that Joyce did not believe in God or spiritual realities. Joyce was never formally excommunicated by the Catholic Church. When asked by Morris Ernst when he had left the Church, Joyce replied ‘That’s for the Church to say’ (Lernout 215). Lernout interprets Joyce’s answer as indicating that the question was not relevant to him, but only to the Church.

After summoning quite a bit of evidence, Lernout concludes that “According to the rules of church he was baptized in, James Joyce lived and died as an apostate, as somebody who had placed himself knowingly and willingly outside of that church” (217). There does not seem to be much contention that Joyce remained outside the Catholic Church once he left it at a relatively young age. However, the questions of whether or not he retained a sense of spirituality and what kind of spirituality that might have been seems to be more of an open question. In a letter to Lady Augusta Gregory written in 1902, Joyce indicated that ‘All things are inconstant except the faith in the soul, which changes all things and fills their inconstancy with light. And though I seem to have been driven out of my country here as a misbeliever I have found no man yet with a faith like mine’ (Lowe-Evans 1). Joyce’s choice of the word “misbeliever” versus “unbeliever” seems intentional. Not believing in Roman Catholic orthodoxy does not mean he does not believe in transcendent realities. At least at that point in his life, Joyce acknowledges his faith in the soul. Although his countrymen might consider him a misbeliever, he seems to indicate that they could not accuse him of being an unbeliever.

He avows a real faith that somehow encompasses the soul, but there is not much specificity indicated beyond that.

Beyond the issue of Joyce's actual spiritual beliefs, there remains the question of how his Roman Catholic background may have influenced his writing. Lernout indicates that "In all of Joyce's prose works religion, and more specifically its catholic form, plays an important role, and this is not just because the country, the city and the class that form the background of his work happened to be predominantly catholic" (206). He notes that religion informs the imagination of several protagonists in *Dubliners* (1914) and serves as one of the nets preventing Stephen Daedalus from flying in *Portrait of the Artist*. While denying that Joyce's mind had a catholic structure, Lernout notes that in later life Joyce acknowledged that "his mind had acquired the working and thinking habits of the Jesuits" (211), so that he was a product of his education. When a friend referred to Joyce as a Catholic, Joyce corrected him by saying, "You allude to me as a Catholic. Now for the sake of precision and to get the correct contour on me, you ought to allude to me as a Jesuit" (Cavanaugh 1).

While not being completely uncritical of his Jesuit educators, it seems that Joyce appreciated the education and ability to think that he received from them. Stephen's views of his Jesuit mentors in *Portrait* are likely similar to those of Joyce: "His [Jesuit] masters, even when they had not attracted him, had seemed to him always intelligent and serious priests . . . it was they who had taught him christian doctrine and urged him to live a good life and, when he had fallen into grievous sin, it was they who had led him back to grace" (156). Lowe-Evans states that there is plenty evidence to suggest that the Jesuits occupied Joyce's mind and "fortified both his and our urge to

revisit memories of their tutelage” (40). Furthermore, Lernout asserts that a thorough knowledge of the catholic world that Joyce describes will add substantially to one’s understanding of his works (211). This will be seen to be the case in the analysis provided below.

Lowe-Evans asserts that Joyce was preoccupied with a Catholic nostalgia, which she describes as “the obsessive urge to return to a, paradoxically, dead but mysteriously vital and intellectually challenging body of Catholic dogma and ritual—pervading Joyce’s works” (1). She contends that this nostalgia derives from Joyce’s “faith in the soul” that was mentioned earlier in his letter to Lady Gregory. Joyce’s eclectic mind was fed by the breadth and depth of his reading as can be seen by the plethora of literary allusions in his novels. Catholicism was indelibly written into the culture and history, the warp and woof of life in his native land and Western Civilization more generally. It does not seem surprising that Joyce would continue to wrestle with doctrines and rituals of this faith that laid its claim to influence over all of life. He might disagree with the specifics, but the grand superstructure of the Church’s metanarrative, teaching, rituals, and symbolism were something to be reckoned with.

As Cranly noted to his friend and classmate, Stephen, in *Portrait*, “It is a curious thing . . . how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve” (240). Like Stephen, Joyce’s life and mind were suffused in Catholic spirituality. The aspiring artist, Stephen, determined that he “would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable” (*Portrait* 170). Yet, an artist must have wings and wind, if their soul would fly to such heights like his namesake

and not crash into the sea like Icarus. Imagination is not based on thin air, not even for a genius. In *James Joyce's Pauline Vision*, Robert Boyle notes that “Brought up as he was, he would most naturally use the tradition in which he developed as a source of his images of the artist as priest, as Christ, as victim, as divine Word, as Creator” (71). The Catholic Church was rich in imagery and metaphor to inform an artist’s imagination.

It is not surprising that the critics read Joyce in such profoundly different ways. His ardent rejection of Roman Catholic orthodoxy and his degrading of the spiritual make it easy for secular critics to see him as a purely secular writer. On the other hand, his frequent use of Christian metaphors and allusions makes it equally easy for Roman Catholics to point out how Christianity influenced his thinking. Boyle seems to capture this dichotomy well when he says, “I suppose each of us will respond more to the aspect which most appeals to us and which we are prepared to perceive. Everyone sees Joyce’s vision as a catholic one, and from my own angle [i.e., as a Jesuit priest], at least, I can see it also as a Catholic one” (41). The bread of daily living that Joyce sought to transmute as artist/priest was full of Catholic imagery and ideas. Although Joyce physically left Ireland and its culture, religion, and politics for the Continent, in another sense, he could never leave that which taught his soul to soar.

### ***Sacramental Structure in Portrait of the Artist***

In *Portrait of the Artist*, the young protagonist, Stephen Dedalus, rejects a calling to the Roman Catholic priesthood as a Jesuit. Instead, he believes he is choosing a higher and better calling with greater depth and breadth of influence—that of the artist. He sees himself as “a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life” (221). Immediately following his declaration of

the sacramental nature of the artist/priest's work, Stephen is reminded of the "radiant image of the eucharist unit[ing] again in an instant his bitter and despairing thoughts" (221). The villanelle he composes in response is also full of Eucharistic imagery. Thus, Eucharistic imagery in all its richness becomes the sine qua non for his journey upward as an artist.

In his article, "The Reverend Stephen Dedalus, S.J.: Sacramental Structure in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*," Kevin Farrell demonstrates that Joyce uses the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church as the organizing principle for his semi-autobiographical novel. As Farrell notes, the protagonist, Stephen Dedalus's, life "is arranged, from childhood to young adulthood, around the progressive presence of the sacramental cycle. It is a pattern that functions both literally and metaphorically" (28). The sacraments of the Catholic Church dovetail nicely with Joyce's *bildungsroman*. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "the seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life" (1210). Part of the beauty of the seven sacraments is that they encompass every stage of life from birth to death and in between. They are intended to lead the believer from infancy to full maturity in the faith. In *Portrait*, Stephen's development from a toddler enamored with the sounds of words to an aspiring artist is encompassed in literal and figurative sacraments.

### Baptism

That Stephen was baptized as an infant can be assumed given he was born to Catholic parents in Dublin. The religious trajectory of his life is something he is born

into. At first, it is not a matter of choice. Stephen begins life immersed in the sacramental stream. At times, he submits to it and at other times he swims against the religious and cultural currents that are so closely intertwined. Whether he will embrace the implicit faith of his governess, Dante, or will say with Mr. Casey, his father's good friend, "No God for Ireland! . . . We have too much God in Ireland. Away with God! (Joyce 39), remains to be seen. The tensions in the argument between Dante and Casey that Stephen hears at home as a young boy, mirror the strains that he experiences within himself throughout his life. Dante cannot be easily dismissed as simply a fideist for both Stephen's father and uncle Charles "said that Dante was a clever woman and a wellread woman" (*Portrait* 11). From his earliest days, Stephen demonstrates intellectual precocity and a love of words. In Dante and the Jesuits who educated him, especially, he sees something that cannot be easily dismissed. The struggles between Dante's and Mr. Casey's viewpoints are seen in the manner in which sacramental imagery can be associated with both positive and negative experiences in Stephen's life. Yet, for good and bad, Stephen's imagination is captivated by sacramental ways of seeing the world.

The first chapter of *Portrait* is full of watery imagery that seems to be alluding to baptism. Given that baptism is the initiatory rite into the Christian faith, it seems appropriate that it should be featured early in the novel. These baptismal images are not always depicted in a positive light by Joyce. At Clongowes Wood College, the Jesuit boarding school that Stephen (and Joyce) attended from the time he was a young boy, Wells, a third-year student, seems to take particular delight in bullying Stephen in his first year. When Stephen refused to trade his little snuff box for Wells's "seasoned hacking chestnut" (apparently a nut used in the game of conkers), Wells shouldered him into a



ditch full of water where “the cold slime of the ditch covered his whole body” (14). The coldness and sliminess of the water is emphasized twice and the recollection of a big rat that was once seen plopping in the scum there seems to further add to Stephen’s misery and presumed embarrassment. Farrell refers to this scene as a “grotesque parody of the sacrament” that “fixates upon the push-and-pull dynamic between Stephen and the Church, making a mock baptism in slimy water an appropriate trope” (31). Stephen’s younger years do not consist of idyllic and nostalgic memories, but of struggles to find his place, make his mark, discover meaning, and overcome bullies young and old. If even a rat like Wells can be baptized, what does baptism signify?

Yet, what preoccupies Stephen’s thinking is not his forcible baptism by Wells, but the question that Wells had embarrassed him with before the other boys: “do you kiss your mother before you go to bed?” (14) Stephen learned that, among the boys at Clongowes, such a question is a double-edged sword with ridicule on one edge and embarrassment on the other. When first asked the question, Stephen naively just answers in the affirmative. However, when Wells tells the other boys and they laugh at him, Stephen tries to recant, which only leads to more laughter. Wet and cold, Stephen wondered “Was it right to kiss his mother or wrong to kiss his mother? What did that mean, to kiss? You put your face up like that to say goodnight and then his mother put her face down. That was to kiss. His mother put her lips on his cheek; her lips were soft and they wetted his cheek; and they made a tiny little noise: kiss” (14-5). Rather than being able to simply delight in this basic expression of love between him and his mother, the young Stephen asks “Why did people do that with their two faces?” Like his mother’s kiss with its telltale wetness left on his cheek, baptism by the Church was intended to

signify God's love and Stephen's acceptance as a beloved son. Stephen looks at both with ambivalence even at a tender age.

Stephen rises from the slimy, wet ditch only to be knocked down again and encounter greater injustice from one of the Jesuit priests who runs the school. When Stephen was run over and knocked down by a student on a bike, his glasses were broken on the cinder path (41). Soon afterwards, Father Dolan, the prefect of studies, was summoned to the classroom to punish a student that Father Arnall accused of being an idler. After administering six terrible blows with his pandybat (a long thin cane reputedly made of whalebone and leather with lead inside) to each of Fleming's hands, Dolan notices that Stephen is not writing like the other students. Even though Arnall tells Dolan that he has exempted Stephen from work because his glasses are broken, Dolan accuses Stephen of being a lazy, idle little loafer who is only scheming to get out of work. Dolan strikes each of Stephen's hands with a "hot burning stinging tingling blow" and "scalding water burst forth from his eyes" (50). The "scalding tears falling out of his eyes and down his flaming cheeks" (51) become another sort of sad baptism for Stephen. His eyes are cleansed and renewed to see things in a new way.

While blinded by his own hot tears and the lack of glasses, Stephen sees that priests are also capable of being "unjust and cruel and unfair" (53). Prior to the beating, Stephen assumed that a priest would know what a sin was (48). Now he sees cruel injustice joined to a pitiful grace as "Father Arnall rose from his seat and went among them, helping the boys with gentle words and telling them the mistakes they had made. His voice was very gentle and soft" (51). Arnall knew Stephen's beating was unjust, but he failed to intervene on his behalf.

Dolan holds the title of “Father,” but “his whitegrey face and the nocoloured eyes behind the steelrimmed spectacles were cruel looking because he had steadied the hand first with his firm soft fingers and that was to hit it better and louder” (52). His appearance seems to resemble the rat that had reputedly jumped in the cold and slimy ditch that Stephen was pushed into. His soutane and soft fingers belie a sadistic wolf in sheep’s clothing. Dolan’s commission of a grave injustice with seeming relish and Arnall’s failure to intervene to stop the crime are juxtaposed against the concept that is central to Christianity: God, the Father, sent His Son to pay for the sins of all his people, so that they might be his adopted children. Giving these priests the title “Father,” seems incongruous. Based on what Stephen’s father had told him, Stephen entered Clongowes believing that Jesuit priests were “all clever men” who “could all have become highup people in the world if they had not become Jesuits” (48). Prior to the incident with Father Dolan, it was hard for Stephen to imagine the Jesuits he knew as men wearing other clothes and facial hair and pursuing secular callings. This is a choice that he too will face later in life. Despite the unjust punishment, as a teenager, Stephen’s views of the Jesuit priests remains generally positive as noted above.

The first chapter of *Portrait* also ends with a watery image. Stephen hears other boys playing cricket, “In the soft grey silence he could hear the bump of the balls: and from here and there through the quiet air the sound of the cricket bats: pick, pack, pock, puck: like drops of water in a fountain falling softly in the brimming bowl” (59). The same metaphor between the sound of the balls hitting the bats and water falling into a brimming bowl was made earlier in the chapter when Stephen was first returning to school after the winter break. So this baptismal-like image seems to intentionally bracket

the section. As Farrell indicates “the description seems most explicitly tied to a sort of baptism, with the sound of water dripping into a brimming bowl suggestive of a baptismal font. We may thus conclude that Stephen has undergone yet another mock-baptism” (32). The question is: to what has he been baptized?

While Stephen’s story at Clongowes begins in a watery ditch, the chapter ends with his elevation. When his classmates learn that Stephen had the audacity to tell the rector of Clongowes, Father Conmee, about Father Dolan’s injustice, they cradled him upward in their hands and regaled him. Yet, Stephen is determined not to be proud and even wishes he could do something kind for Father Dolan (59). Farrell assumes that “he has been baptized into the lives of both the obedient Catholic and the rebellious artist, yet the course of his life remains ambiguous” (32). These are the poles between which Stephen will vacillate until he receives the epiphany that makes his choice clear near the end of *Portrait*.

As an incipient poet, Stephen constantly makes connections through his metaphorical mind. His thoughts move with ease from the rhythmic sound of cricket balls hitting bats to the sound of water drops falling into the baptismal bowl. The rituals of the Catholic Church with all their metaphorical richness in some way structure how he perceives and orders the world. Yet, for him the baptismal font is not adequate to contain his imagination that overflows beyond the Church’s constricting limits. The Jesuits were filling his fertile imagination with the history of the great men of Greece and Rome (53) and even Father Dolan’s life exudes Shakespearean drama (“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” he threateningly indicates is how often he will return to check on the class; 49). As a young boy, Stephen understood that to be great, one must be different

from the crowd. While walking to Father Conmee's office, he went by what he thought "were the portraits of the saints and great men of the [Jesuit] order who were looking down on him silently as he passed" (55). He seems to see himself as in their lineage, willing to be the martyr to be great and to advance the greater glory of God. As the drops of water fill the baptismal font and have their own musicality, so the moments of Stephen's life along with his knowledge and experiences are filling up and preparing to overflow.

### Eucharist and Penance

While baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the Catholic Church, the Eucharist is the sacrament that nourishes the believer's faith as they literally feed on Christ by faith. Although Stephen's literal baptism is not referred to in *Portrait*, his first communion is described. As he thought about some students who had stolen sacramental wine from the sacristy, Stephen recalled his own first holy communion in the chapel when he "shut his eyes and opened his mouth and put out his tongue a little: and when the rector had stooped down to give him the holy communion he had smelt a faint winy smell off the rector's breath after the wine of the mass" (46). At the time that Joyce was writing, the wine was not offered to the laity. So, Stephen's participation in the wine during his first communion is only through smelling it on the breath of the priest administering the host to him. The faint smell of wine on the rector's breath on the morning of his first communion made Stephen feel somewhat sick. Yet, he knew that the day of one's first communion should be the happiest of one's life. When Napoleon was asked about the happiest day of his life, Stephen heard that rather than mentioning some great victory in battle as expected, he had said it was the day of his first communion (47).

Even though the day of one's first communion should be the happiest of one's life, the withholding of the wine from the average person and its accessibility only to the priest, emphasizes some good thing held back. As he considers the theft of the sacramental wine by fellow students, Stephen thinks to himself "That must have been a terrible sin, to go in there quietly at night, to open the dark press and steal the flashing gold thing into which God was put on the altar in the middle of flowers and candles at benediction while the incense went up in clouds at both sides as the fellow swung the censor . . . He thought of it with deep awe; a terrible and strange sin" (46). It thrilled Stephen to think of it. After further reflection, Stephen thought it was not so terrible and strange; the smell only makes one a little sick. In one sense, the theft of wine by the students seems Promethean, like stealing fire from the gods and giving it to humanity against the gods' will. In another sense, the mystical transubstantiation of the wine into Christ's blood still smells like wine on the priest's breath. It retains its earthy smell.

With his poetical mind, Stephen seems intrigued by the mysterious nature of the mass, its accessibility and inaccessibility—its awesome, terrible and strange nature that is nonetheless perceived in common material terms. Is the artist a priest or a Prometheus? Is Prometheus really to be blamed for giving the good gifts from the gods to humankind? Like the priest, does the poet drink in what seems to be ordinary and breathe it out as life giving spirit? Through his reading as a teenager, Stephen begins drawing inspiration from Lord Byron (70). The Poetry Foundation's article on Byron notes that "He created an immensely popular Romantic hero—defiant, melancholy, haunted by secret guilt—for which, to many, he seemed the model . . . In obviously autobiographical poems Byron experiments with personae, compounded of his true self and of fictive elements, which

both disclose and disguise him.” Given this description, it is not surprising that Stephen would be attracted to Byron’s poetry and life as models. When asked by a classmate “who do you think is the greatest poet?,” Stephen answers, “Byron, of course” (81) Stephen defends his answer although his friends call Byron an immoral heretic and beat him with a cane and knotty cabbage stump to try to get him to recant.

As a teenager, intellectual and spiritual sustenance seem insufficient for Stephen. “Nothing stirred within his soul but cold and cruel and loveless lust . . . he was drifting amid life like the barren shell of the moon” (96). He longs for romance and satisfaction of his physical desires. “The vastness and strangeness of life . . . wakened again in him the unrest which had sent him wandering in the evening from garden to garden in search of Mercedes [heroine in *The Count of Monte Cristo*]” (66). In his wandering, “wasting fires of lust sprang up again” and “He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin” (99-100). Away from the Church and its sacraments, he is drawn toward a different communion with different rites. He wanders down a “maze of narrow and dirty streets” until “The yellow gasflames arose before his troubled vision against the vapoury sky, burning as if before an altar. Before the doors and in the lighted halls groups were gathered arrayed as for some rite” (100). Having begun by searching for romance with Mercedes, Chapter 2 ends with Stephen in the embrace of a prostitute. He has fallen into carnality with a woman; like Adam he had eaten the forbidden fruit with Eve.

His first liaison with prostitutes leads to many more. The impact on his spiritual life was might be expected: “Devotion had gone by the board. What did it avail to pray when he knew that his soul lusted after its own destruction? . . . His pride in his own sin,

his loveless awe of God, told him that his offense was too grievous to be atoned for in whole or in part by a false homage to the Allseeing and Allknowing” (103-4). At the age of sixteen, Stephen hears a hell and brimstone sermon during a retreat service when he is a student at Belvedere College that ultimately offers the grace of the gospel to sinners. Convicted of his sin, Stephen seeks a church away from Belvedere where he can covertly find a priest to offer his confession and receive absolution for his sins. After the priest had raised his hand in token of forgiveness, Stephen “knelt to say his penance . . . and his prayers ascended to heaven from his purified heart like perfume streaming upwards from a heart of white rose” (145). Stephen’s repentance and the forgiveness he received led to a sense of pardon, peace, and happiness.

In a dream, he saw himself kneeling before the altar with his classmates to preparing for the Eucharist. “His hands were trembling, and his soul trembled as he heard the priest pass with the ciborium from communicant to communicant . . . He knelt there sinless and timid: and he would hold upon his tongue the host and God would enter his purified body . . . The past was past . . . The ciborium had come to him” (146). Through the sacrament of penance, Stephen’s sin-cleansed soul is once again prepared to receive the sacrament of the Eucharist. The two go hand and hand. The Prodigal Son repentantly returns home and finds to his surprise that the Father rejoices and calls for a feast in his honor.

### Holy Orders

Stephen’s return to God seems genuine in every way. His earnestness was demonstrated in a dedicated pursuit of spiritual practices like saying the rosaries, prayer, and fasting. He also seems to have developed a sacramental imagination as “his soul was



enriched with spiritual knowledge, he saw the whole world forming one vast symmetrical expression of God's power and love. Life became a divine gift for every moment and sensation of which, were it even the sight of a single leaf hanging on the twig of a tree, his soul should praise and thank the Giver" (149-50). Stephen sees even the tiniest details of the material world as gracious gifts from God. His spirituality seems so evident and extraordinary that the Jesuit priest who is director of Belvedere College asks to meet with him to ask Stephen if he had ever felt a desire within his soul to join the Jesuit order (157).

The director notes that "In a college like this . . . there is one boy or perhaps two or three boys whom God calls to the religious life. Such a boy is marked off from his companions by his piety, by the good example he shows to others. He is looked up to by them; he is chosen perhaps as prefect by his fellow sodalists"<sup>14</sup> (157). The director argues that the calling to the priesthood "is the greatest honour that the Almighty God can bestow upon a man" noting that not even the Blessed Virgin Mary has the awful power of a priest of God who can "make the great God of Heaven come down upon the altar and take the form of bread and wine" (158). As Farrell notes, "Having put his protagonist through baptism, reconciliation, communion, and confirmation, Joyce has skillfully constructed the Jesuit offer of the path towards holy orders" (34-5). Joyce uses the sacraments of the Church to bring Stephen to the point of decision regarding the highest calling the Church can offer him—that of the priesthood, but not just an ordinary

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<sup>14</sup> According to a webpage of the The James Joyce Centre, Joyce was appointed prefect of the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Belvedere College in 1896. The webpage goes on to indicate that "The Sodality of the Blessed Virgin Mary was an association of students who were dedicated to showing special honour to the Virgin Mary. The sodality was overseen by a director, one of the Jesuit priests at the College, but the positions of prefect and assistant prefect were filled by election from the members of the sodality. Election to those positions was a considerable honour."

priesthood, that of the intellectually and spiritually elite Jesuits. Farrell notes that the director's appeal is in "cryptically gnostic terms, the sum of Christian wisdom and the ultimate power of man on earth. In short, he is tendered the completion of the cycle and offered an apotheosis" (36). The gnostic appeal is significant in terms of what was discussed in Chapter 2.

The director's words appealed to Stephen's pride and Stephen had mused about being a priest many times before. Ultimately, he rejected the life of priest with its special knowledge and awesome power because he saw it ultimately as "a grave and ordered and passionless life . . . The chill and order of the life repelled him" (160-1). He saw the vocation of priesthood as threatening his freedom and determined that "He was destined to learn his own wisdom apart from others or to learn the wisdom of others himself wandering among the snares of the world" (162). Stephen rejects the life of the priest for the life of the artist, but his imagination still thinks of the artist in priestly and sacramental terms as he determines that he will be "a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life" (221).

Rather than limiting himself to bread and wine, Stephen wants to take in all of life's experiences and transform them through his artistic skill, originality, and freedom into radiant, beautiful, and eternal life. Like the priest within the Church, his goal is to lead people to eternal life, but one that begins in the here and now and includes bodies, not just souls. In addition, Stephen's visions extends to offering life to those beyond the Church. Stephen's search for a secular approach to everliving life is discussed in the next chapter, which provides a close reading of Joyce's novel *Ulysses*. As Farrell indicates, Joyce's *bildungsroman* of a priest transitions into a *kunstlerroman* of the artist (32).

However, the epiphany that makes the artist's calling clear can be viewed as a trans-secular event.

***Trans-secular Sacramentality***

Stephen's epiphany occurs near the end of Chapter 4 of *Portrait*. As he is wandering alone near the sea coast in Dublin, he sees a girl before him midstream in the water and gazing out to sea. Stephen sees her in the following manner:

She seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful seabird. Her long slender bare legs were delicate as a crane's and pure save where an emerald trail of seaweed had fashioned itself as a sign upon her flesh. Her thighs, fuller and soft-hued as ivory, were bared almost to the hips where the white fringes of her drawers were like the featherings of soft white down . . . her bosom was as a bird's soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some dark-plumaged dove. But her long fair hair was girlish . . . and touched with the wonder of mortal beauty, her face. (171)

Upon this transfixing vision, Stephen's soul cried "Heavenly God!" in "an outburst of profane joy" (171). The heavenly had come down to Earth in the form of a dove like the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus at his baptism. Yet, despite the emphasis on whiteness, the plumage of this dove is somehow darkened by its association with Earth. Stephen no longer seeks transcendence within the Church. Instead he looks to the world for new visions and symbols to satisfy his soul. Thus, his praise to God for the vision is one of profane, rather than sacred joy.

Like our own day, Stephen lives in a world where sacred and secular are clearly demarcated with the sacred being found only within the Church. This devalues the world.

As he looks outside the Church for beauty and inspiration for his soul, he finds it was there all along. “Her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life! A wild angel had appeared to him . . . to throw open before him in an instant of ecstasy the gates of all the ways of error and glory” (172). The vision of this bird-like girl is soul altering. In Stephen’s conception, the artist must know and experience all of life, sin and error, triumph and glory. Within life there is no end to the possibilities and material for the artist’s imagination to reveal the life hidden in life. In this sense, all of life becomes a sacrament in its ability to reveal glorious beauty and transcendent truth.

In “What the Thunder Said: A Portrait of the Artist as a Trans-secular Event,” Jack Dudley connects Stephen’s epiphany with sacramental ways of seeing the world. He argues that “when Joyce reworked traditional ideas of transcendence, amid a Catholic controversy about nature and the supernatural, he crafted a modernist religious experience in his conception of epiphany, one that . . . strikingly anticipates the trans-secular philosophical projects of leading theorists Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek, both atheists and materialists” (457-8). As was noted earlier in this chapter, there was a reaction to scientific materialism in the intellectual and artistic circles of Joyce’s day. Though science and technology can be extraordinarily useful, they are not able to address the issues that are most important to humanity. Because of the “failure of atheistic materialism to construct a sense of meaning as robust and fulfilling as that offered by religion,”<sup>15</sup> Joyce, Badiou, and Žižek “draw on religious structures and ontologies”

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<sup>15</sup> In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud argues that “only religion can answer the question of the purpose of life. One can hardly be wrong in concluding that the idea of life having a purpose stands and

(Dudley 458). Scientism's claims that science is *the* source of objective truth is a myth.<sup>16</sup> Thus, there is a desire to find a method for accessing transcendent realities that are distinct from traditional religious orthodoxies.

Given the tendency in our world to make either/or distinctions between the sacred and secular, a third way of apprehending meaning may be missed. Dudley argues that Joyce uses a trans-secular approach that is “neither comfortably classified as religious or secular” (458). This may help explain why those who are secular (like Lernout) tend to read Joyce as secular and many who are religious (like Lowe-Evans) may read Joyce as demonstrating a latent religiosity. The concept of the trans-secular event allows for the emergence of truth, goodness, and beauty—values humans care about that are not derivable from a secular materialist mindset. Dudley suggests that “the trans-secular moment is Joyce's way of escaping the traditional nets of orthodox religion while slyly retaining its meaning-making procedures for key moments of character and plot structured around the epiphany as religious event” (458). Joyce does not want to be constrained by orthodox religious categories. He realizes that there are soul-altering events that occur in people's lives that provide them access to something transcendent

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falls with the religious system” (42). Of course, Freud is not arguing on behalf of religion and in fact indicts religion as inimical to human happiness even though it often “succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis” (56). Against Freud, it can be argued that Aristotle addresses purpose in life apart from a religious context. However, Freud's remarks give some idea of how the materialism of modernity leaves people who desire meaning often frustrated and looking for other answers. Freud quotes Goethe's claim that ‘He who possesses science and art also has religion, but he who possesses neither of these two, let him have religion’ (40). I argue in the next chapter that the relationship between Stephen as the artist and Leonard Bloom as the scientist illustrates Goethe's argument.

<sup>16</sup> In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson note that “the myth of objectivism has dominated Western culture, and in particular Western philosophy, from the Pre-socratics to the present day. The view that we have absolute and unconditional truths about the world is the cornerstone of the Western philosophical tradition. The myth of objectivity has flourished in both the rationalist and empiricist traditions, which in this respect differ only in their accounts of how we arrive at such absolute truths” (195). The myth of objective truth downplays poetic, artistic, and narrative ways of knowing that I would argue are more likely to lead to meaning making than purely scientific and rationalistic approaches to knowledge.

(i.e., that exists beyond the sensible world), which provides meaning, often in terms of concepts like beauty, goodness, and truth.

The kind of trans-secular mean-making may allow humanity to move beyond alienation and nihilism. It also can relate to an understanding of a sacramental imagination that disowns the sacred/secular dichotomy as was discussed in Chapter 2. It is important to grasp this concept to understand Joyce's work. As Dudley notes, through the use of epiphany as an aesthetic structural form, "Joyce presented the trivial and ordinary incidents as conduits for extraordinary meaning" (459). This will be demonstrated in more detail in the next chapter, which entails a close reading of *Ulysses* in which all events occur within a normal 24-hour day. In contrast, Homer's epic, the *Odyssey*, occurs over a ten-year period. The correspondence between the epiphany and sacraments is also important to note. Dudley points out that "The transubstantiation of the Catholic mass, where bread and wine is converted to the body and blood of Christ, repeats the epiphany's structure, where the everyday is revealed to be extraordinary" (460). The term epiphany does not have the religious overtones of the word sacrament, but they are closely linked together in Joyce's thinking. The artist takes the ordinary stuff of life and reveals its underlying extraordinary nature. This poesis is a way to regain enchantment in a modern world generally characterized by disenchantment. This shift to the mundane as the medium for mean-making is seen in other great modernist works like Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Joyce's *Dubliners*, and Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

Joyce's approach to the epiphany shifts spiritual meaning-making from organized religious institutions with their prescribed rituals to the individual. The individual selects

what constitutes meaning for them and can be eclectic in doing so. Similarly, “the writer selects from tradition those elements he thinks of value and resituates them to give new meaning to the modern situation” (Dudley 461). For example, Joyce reimagines Homer’s *Odyssey* and Augustine’s *Confessions*<sup>17</sup> from a modernist perspective. Drawing from them and transmuting them at the same time. *Ulysses* is a tour de force of artistic synthesis of a variety of literary styles and sources even as Joyce experimented with stream of consciousness and other techniques where he was breaking new ground.

While eschewing organized Christian religion and religious institutions, Joyce does not view spirituality from an inimical viewpoint. He rejects Neoplatonist (world as ‘the kingdom of the soul’s malady’) and certain Christian (world as ‘a place of probation’) views in an essay he wrote about Giordano Bruno (1548-1600). He writes approvingly of Bruno’s approach to the world as ‘his opportunity for spiritual activity’ (Dudley 460, 470). This is important because it demonstrates that Joyce was against the kind of material/spiritual dualism discussed in Chapter 2. Dudley argues that in *Ulysses*, “Stephen offers a radical notion of God present in the mundane and the everyday” in contrast to the headmaster at the school where Stephen teaches, Mr. Deasy, who sees God as “above and outside creation” (467). Stephen emphasizes God’s immanence in opposition to Deasy’s emphasis on God’s transcendence. Although Joyce uses irony, comedy and scandal, this does not suggest that a rejection of religious value according to Dudley (470). As will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, those who mock all

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<sup>17</sup> In a number of ways, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* parallels Augustine’s famous autobiography that set the standard for all subsequent biography in the West. Both Augustine and Stephen were intellectual geniuses searching for spiritual fulfillment, but who struggled mightily with controlling their sexual desires. At first, Stephen seems to follow Augustines’s path from spiritual crisis to conversion, but whereas Augustine accepts his calling by the Church to the priesthood (albeit something impressed upon him to an extent), Stephen rejects the Church’s calling in favor of becoming an artist/priest of the imagination.

transcendent values and desacralize the world like Buck Mulligan in *Ulysses* are clearly viewed by Joyce with disapprobation as usurpers. Joyce's rejection of Roman Catholicism does not imply a concomitant rejection of spirituality or transcendent values.

### ***An Earthy Artist Embracing Embodiment***

As noted above, Joyce rejects Gnosticism and Neoplatonist forms of Christianity that would diminish the world's worth. While the previous section focused on Joyce's emphasis on the epiphany as a trans-secular event that can lead one from the mundane to the sublime, this section will focus on the manner in which embodiment and earthy things seem to be embraced in Joyce's work, particularly in *Ulysses*. In "Heavenbeast,"<sup>18</sup> Donovan Schaefer notes that his reading of Joyce is more in line with those that "emphasize Joyce's fixation with the mundane, the material, and the grotesque" (120). I will argue that Farrell's and Schaefer's views represent different emphases on the nature of Joyce's work, but are not necessarily opposed to one another. While I will argue against some of Schaefer's conclusions, I think he still provides some valuable insights.

One of the two primary protagonists of *Ulysses*, Leopold Bloom, is an earthy man. While this will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, some introduction related to this significant attribute is important to get an overall understanding of Joyce's

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<sup>18</sup> Schaefer argues that "Whereas Catholic critics often want to read Joyce as being 'spiritual but not religious,' I would argue that his epiphanies are, in fact, religious, but not transcendent" (133). He goes on to contend that Joyce's approach is more in keeping with the New Materialism. He cites Helen Grosz's and other New Materialists who suggest that "we must reacquaint ourselves with our own animality as 'a necessary reminder of the limits of the human, its historical and ontological contingency'" (133). Schaefer indicates that "Ulysses wraps language, animality, and matter together . . . in Joyce's work, the traditional metaphysical vision of Paradise is radically reconfigured. Where 'Dante's Terrestrial Paradise is the carriage entrance to a Paradise that is not terrestrial,' Beckett writes, 'Mr. Joyce's Terrestrial Paradise is the tradesmen's entrance onto the sea-shore'" (133). I would argue that the emphasis of Paradise being found on Earth is not just a New Materialist vision, but of a right understanding of the Christian vision of eternity consisting of a new heavens and a new Earth where heaven comes down to Earth and God dwells with His people (Revelation 21-22).



approach. In keeping with his name, Bloom is a man who is firmly grounded in the Earth and blossoms in association with it. He is a man who is present to the details of the world around him. He takes them in with all of his senses, thinks about them insightfully, and appreciates their inherent goodness. Schaefer indicates that “Joyce’s grotesques show us bodies masturbating, defecating, getting drunk, philandering, misspeaking, drifting, stinking like onions, rambling, kissing each other’s rear ends. These are not crystals of metaphysical truth, the place where all roads lead. These are animals; their God is opaque, oblique, and jagged – a cry in the street” (134). The earthiness of *Ulysses* is captured well by Schaefer in summary form, but I disagree with his interpretation of the significance. Schaefer provides some useful references to Mikhail Bakhtin that help to shed light on what Joyce is seeking to communicate in *Ulysses*. However, I draw different conclusions as to what Bakhtin’s theories mean in interpreting Joyce’s novel.

Bakhtin’s analysis of two genres of literature help to contextualize *Ulysses*. The first is grotesque realism, which he associates with François Rabelais and other writers of the Renaissance as indicated in *The Bakhtin Reader*. As Bakhtin indicates, “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (205). With grotesque realism, high and lofty religious and philosophical speculations are brought down to Earth. As was demonstrated in Chapter 2, there has often been a tendency in Christianity to elevate the spiritual above the physical, the soul above the body. At first it might seem that grotesque realism presents the body in a negative manner, but Bakhtin argues that “the bodily element is deeply positive” in grotesque realism. Rather than glossing over the indelicacies and

crudities associated with bodily life as contrasted with the rather neat and sanitized spiritual ideals that are supposedly superior, we can laugh at our embodiment as something we share, something that unites us to one another and the Earth. What is degraded is not the body, but that which would set itself above the body and the Earth.

Grotesque realism is incarnational. As Bakhtin indicates “Not only parody in its narrow sense but all other forms of grotesque realism degrade, bring down to earth, turn their subject into flesh . . . Laughter degrades and materializes” (206). Joyce makes extensive use of parody in *Ulysses*. As embodied beings, we cannot really escape the mundane and the corporeal with all its associated crudities. By bringing them into the light and laughing about them, we refocus on our embodiment. To see the grotesque brought into the open can be shocking and funny. Rather than just focusing on the mind and the soul, grotesque realism “means to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs; it therefore relates to defecation and copulation, conception, pregnancy, and birth” (206). At one level these may seem crude, but at another level they are marvelous and mysterious.

Bakhtin captures this twofold aspect as follows: “Degradation here means coming down to earth, the contact with earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the same time . . . To degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (206). I would argue that this is exactly what Joyce is seeking to do—to bring forth something new and more and better, a resurrected and united ensouled body. Against the body-soul and physical-spiritual dualisms that are so often characteristic of Christianity and life in the West in general, Joyce wants his readers to consider other options. To bring the metaphysical down to earth is not materialism. It

does not suggest that transcendent realities do not exist, but rather that when they are found they will be found in the stuff of materiality. If we despise the material world as inferior, we will miss out on opportunities not only to enjoy it fully, but to allow it to connect us to the transcendent, to the Earth, and to one another. As Bakhtin notes, “The cosmic, social, and bodily elements are given as an indivisible whole and this whole is gay and gracious” (205). The possibility of seeing these connections everywhere is what excites Stephen when he sees the bird-girl on the beach through new eyes.

Donovan also connects *Ulysses* to another genre of literature that is even older than grotesque realism—that of the Menippean satire. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, Bakhtin indicates that this literary genre took its name from Menippus of Gadara, a philosopher of the third century C.E. Bakhtin provides 14 basic characteristics of the genre. Although many of those characteristics would apply to *Ulysses*, I will note only a few topics that most relate to the subject at hand. Some of the characteristics of Menippean satire include the following: an emphasis on the comic element; extraordinary freedom of plot and philosophical invention, including use of the fantastic; creation of extraordinary situations for provoking and testing of a philosophical idea; content revolves around the adventures of an *idea* or a *truth* in the world; organic combination of the free fantastic, the symbolic, philosophical dialogue, at times even a mystical-religious element with an extreme and crude *slum naturalism*; “ultimate questions” are put to the test; and moral-psychological experimentation, including unusual dreams. I agree with Donovan that these and other elements cited by Bakhtin are readily seen in *Ulysses*, but I again disagree with his conclusion as to Joyce’s purpose in using the methodology of that genre.

Like Flannery O'Connor, I would argue that Joyce is using the grotesque (slum naturalism) for shock value to wake up his readers and to get them to reconsider their preconceived ideas and cultural assumptions. Donovan asserts that “a menippean satire is not oriented toward epiphanies that link the characters of the book to transcendence. It highlights instead the way in which characters are bound by networks of interlaced material forces. Joyce’s juxtaposition of scatological with the arch satirizes human pretensions to cosmic relevance” (130). With regard to Donovan’s first statement, I would argue that Joyce is not dismissing or neglecting the transcendent through his satire, but pointing to where it may be truly and ironically found—the mundane stuff of life. With regard to Donovan’s last statement, I do not think that Joyce was demonstrating that human aspirations for cosmic relevance are farcical. Along with Bakhtin, I think Joyce’s point is that the cosmic, social, and bodily elements are an indivisible and gracious whole. What should be ridiculed is not human relevance in the cosmos, but looking for that relevance apart from connections to the body and the Earth.

*Portrait of the Artist* highlights the young artist’s aspirations to find transcendence in the stuff of daily life. Stephen has rejected the Catholic religion, but not the soul and the concept of transcendence. In *Ulysses*, Bloom is a secular humanist who does not believe in the transcendent, but who nonetheless seeks connections with other humans, animals, and the Earth. Apart from religion, he has developed an ethic of doing good to others and appreciating all of life. Yet, as will be seen in the next chapter, it is not the humanist alone or the artist alone that provides the ideal for Joyce, but the linking of

the two together. In “Miracle in Black Ink: A Glance at Joyce’s Use of the Eucharistic Image,”<sup>19</sup> Boyle summarizes this potential conjunction as follows:

It is Bloom as priest . . . who, having brooded over the Eucharist in the Mass he witnessed, says of himself in his imagined clean trough of water, ‘This is my body.’ He can give, if not romantic ever-living life, real human life to others, which Stephen, priest of the eternal imagination, aiming to give a romantic reflection of the life his own twisted experience has revealed to him, cannot do, since, like the Prodigal, he squanders his substance among whores. Bloom’s eucharist, less inflated than Stephen’s, would indeed be human only and mortal, but it would be complete . . . If [Stephen’s] eucharist could be mixed with Bloom’s, the results might be good—or they might not. (55)

Despite Boyle’s reservations, Bloom’s and Stephen’s encounters with one another near the end of *Ulysses* leaves open hopeful possibilities. The aspiring artist has found a father figure who exemplifies the best in humanity and who enters into the mundane experiences of others for their benefit. Bloom has perhaps found a son who can help him believe in and find transcendence in the everyday.

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<sup>19</sup> Boyle traces Joyce’s image of art as Eucharist through *Portrait of the Artist*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegan’s Wake*. He notes that in *Finnegan’s Wake*, Shem, “having prepared a caustic ink out of his own body wastes, is described, after he has written human history on his own skin, as ‘transaccidentated through the slow fires of consciousness into a dividual chaos’” (53). Now the daily bread of experience in *Portrait* becomes the Artist himself, as the bread in the Eucharist becomes Christ. “Thus, under the accidents of this human ink, composed of faeces and urine as the Eucharist is composed of bread and wine, the artist makes himself available to his race, to give them conscience—to make them share, as the [*Finnegan’s Wake*] passage makes clear, in all human history by plunging with the individual artist into the dividual human chaos, substantiated in the verbal chaosmos of *Finnegan’s Wake*. So Joyce as a human being . . . contains in himself all humanity, as the particular contains the universal” (53). Ultimately, art as Eucharist becomes artist as Eucharist.

### ***Conclusion***

The dispute among the critics as to whether Joyce's vision was a catholic one or a Catholic one will likely never be resolved. As Boyle noted, everyone tends to respond to the aspects of Joyce's writing that they find most appealing. There seems to be little doubt that Joyce rejected the Roman Catholicism that was such a fundamental part of his upbringing, yet the question remains as to whether Catholicism was an organizing principle or frame of reference in his mind. Even Lernaut who is adamant in his argument that Joyce was an unbeliever from the beginning of his writing career until his death acknowledges that religion, especially in its Catholic form, played an important role in all of Joyce's prose works. However, Lernaut also disputes that Joyce's mind was locked in a Catholic frame of reference. Even its greatest critics would likely have to concede that Roman Catholicism is based on an extensive metanarrative that is full of rich symbolism and metaphor that has indelibly impacted Western Civilization. For Joyce as a great syncretizer and synthesizer of literary forms and ideas to ignore such a rich aspect of daily experience in his work as an artist seems highly unlikely. Indeed, it is not born out by the evidence, as indicated in this chapter and the subsequent one.

Whether Joyce retains a type of spirituality even as he rejects Roman Catholicism also remains an open question to some extent. This is perhaps a more important issue for understanding his oeuvre. As a modern writer, Joyce understands the significance of rejecting spirituality and what it means for modernity in terms of alienation, nihilism, and the resulting hopelessness and meaninglessness. Like his young protagonist, Stephen, I think that Joyce's writings demonstrate that he believes in "the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature" (*Ulysses* 483)—something impossible to understand in terms

of meaningless matter in motion. Searching for ways to understand and disclose what was behind that spirit apart from orthodox religion, seems like a key part of Joyce's project. Like O'Connor and Berry, Joyce rejects the dualisms of body and soul, of matter and spirit that were so pervasive in his own day and in ours. Through grotesque realism and Mennipean satire, Joyce degrades the spiritual in order that it might be reunited to the body and the Earth once again.

Also, like O'Connor and Berry, he sees a sacramental approach as the means by which matter and spirit are rejoined in mutually beneficial harmony. Through Roman Catholicism and his Jesuit education, the young artist in *Portrait* forms a sacramental imagination. In *Ulysses*, the more mature artist, Joyce, intimates how to transmute the daily bread of experience into everliving life. Beginning with the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church, he fashions new secular sacraments as a priest of the eternal imagination and distributes the transformed elements to his readers to nourish their humanity in its totality, body and soul. This will be demonstrated in more detail by a close reading of *Ulysses* in the next chapter.

## Chapter 5

### **Cocoa and Communion: Secular Sacraments in James Joyce's *Ulysses***

The young protagonist in James Joyce's novel *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus, has rejected the Roman Catholic faith and Irish nationalism, two major sources of commonality that draw many of his countrymen together. Rather than seeing the religious institution and political movement as means of grace and freedom, respectively, the young artist perceives them as chains from which he must break free. Though Stephen is brilliant and gifted, he seems to be wandering aimlessly as an outsider with nothing to ground his creative imagination until he encounters Leopold Bloom, an ethnic Jew who also remains an outsider despite his compassionate and generous approach to human relationships. Although Stephen's biological father, Simon, is still living, he represents in many respects the antithesis of what Stephen wants to become.

*Ulysses* tells the story of Stephen's search for a father figure and Bloom's search for a son to replace his only son, Rudy, who died as an infant. In Bloom, Stephen finds a secular prophet and priest who embodies and epitomizes modern man at his flawed best. Recognizing the sacredness of life while rejecting religion as truth, Bloom shows Stephen how to live sacramentally as a secular humanist. In fact, all seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are transformed into secular equivalents that are enacted by Bloom in the course of a single day of life. Though he sees the soul as nothing more than a projection of grey-matter, Bloom embraces all of living as sacred. Together, Bloom as the scientist and Stephen as the artist represent modern man and serve as the priests and prophets of a secular religion. While inventing the modern novel, Joyce also provides a



prescription for a cosmopolitan and humanistic approach to living that transcends particular places and religious affiliations through a sacramental approach to the world.

### ***The Power of Sacraments and Rituals***

Before considering the manner in which Bloom enacts secular sacraments in *Ulysses*, it is important to think about how sacraments function, why they are important for society, and how they can function in a secular context. In “Partaking of the Sacraments with Blake and O’Connor,” Stephen Behrendt describes sacraments as “a form or instrument of formal and ritualized behavior that is assumed to confer both grace and spiritual value upon the recipient/participant or ‘communicant.’” (118). Participants in sacraments expect to receive a spiritual benefit as they enact established rituals. Helen Andretta notes that “The sacraments are incarnational in that they require proper matter and form to effect grace . . . [which] flows mysteriously from God to humankind through matter” (49). Hence, sacraments are embodied acts that involve interaction with the material world in some specified manner in order to obtain divine grace.

However, sacraments are not individual acts, but are enacted within a group of people who share a common religious commitment. As Lynn Hunt indicates:

in his influential study of the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, [Emile] Durkheim argued that the essential function of religion was to provide social solidarity. Religion was society’s way of making itself sacred; religion created the emotional bonds that made people obey social rules willingly. No society could exist without this sense of its sacredness . . . According to Durkheim, the French Revolution was an especially dramatic example of this principle: this aptitude of

society for setting itself up as a god or for creating gods was never more apparent than during the first years of the French Revolution. (xi-xii)

After the leaders of the French Revolution banned the performance of religious services in 1792, many of the churches were turned into Temples of Reason, secular services were created to replace the Christian liturgy and Feasts of Reason supplanted religious holidays. In 1793, an actress portraying the goddess of Reason was enthroned at Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris during the Feast of Reason. Thus, even a government that was committed to doing away with traditional religious expression felt the need to replace it with forms of secular ritual that embodied the ideals of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*.

While whiling away some time before a friend's funeral, Bloom enters a Catholic Church to observe the mass and reflects on those receiving the host from the priest: "Now I bet it makes them feel happy . . . Then feel like one family party, same in the theatre, all in the same swim. They do. I'm sure of that. Not so lonely. In our confraternity" (*Ulysses* 67). Although Bloom sees the religious meaning behind the sacrament as "hokypoky," he nonetheless has a great appreciation for what it does for the participants. Throughout *Ulysses*, Bloom and Stephen enact secular sacraments that allude to the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church.

### ***Baptism***

Baptism is the initiatory sacrament for entry into the Christian faith. Bloom was baptized three times: once as a protestant, once under a pump by three males with Irish names, and lastly by the same Catholic priest in the same church where Stephen was baptized (495). Luca Crispi indicates that the second baptism referred to a childish prank or hazing ritual perpetrated by three of Bloom's schoolmates that was probably related to

his Jewish ethnicity (85). It seems that when it comes to baptism, Bloom had all his bases covered, but he seeks more than a one and done initiatory rite.

Allusions to baptism are seen at the Turkish bath in Chapter 5 (The Lotus-Eaters) and when Bloom washes up at home at the end of long day in Chapter 17 (Ithaca). Bloom's anticipation of the Turkish bath is described as follows: "Time to get a bath round the corner. Hammam. Turkish. Massage. Dirt gets rolled up in your navel. Nicer if a nice girl did it. Also I think I. Yes I. Do it in the bath. Curious longing I. Water to water. Combine business with pleasure. Pity no time for massage. Feel fresh then all the day (70)." In addition to the desire to feel clean and fresh from the removal of dirt, Bloom has a curious longing for water and uses wording that is reminiscent of Jesus's institution of the Lord's Supper as well as the baptismal font when he says, "Enjoy a bath now: clean trough of water, cool enamel, the gentle tepid stream. This is my body" (72). Bloom lives in the moment with all his senses fully engaged in what he is experiencing at any given time and has an inherent, poetic knack for drawing connections with other facets of life. This seems to be part of the key to his living sacramentally.

His anticipation of the bath grew as he imagined "his pale body reclined in it at full, naked, in a womb of warmth, oiled by scented melted soap . . . He saw his trunk and limbs riprippled over and sustained, buoyed lightly upward, lemonyellow: his navel, bud of flesh: and saw the dark tangled curls of his bush floating, floating hair of the stream around the limp father of thousands, a languid floating flower" (72). Baptism is a sacrament representing spiritual rebirth and Bloom's description of the bath feeling like a "womb of warmth" captures that idea. The scent of the soap seems to recall the incense wafted by the priest at the altar. The contemplation of his penis reminds him of his

Jewish heritage and circumcision as the initiatory sign of faith that was given to Abraham and his offspring. However, the promise to Abraham that his progeny would be as numerous as the sand of the seashore seems stunted in Bloom's life given the death of his son and the absence of a male heir to carry on the family name.

When Bloom returns home at the end of a long day he washes his dirty hands with the bar of soap he had purchased earlier in the day and "fresh cold neverchanging everchanging water" (488). Bloom, "waterlover, drawer of water, watercarrier," gives an almost encyclopedic paean to water admiring its varied qualities: universality, democratic equality and constancy to its nature in seeking its own level, vastness in the oceans, unplumbed profundity, restlessness of its waves, independence of its units, variability of sea states, quiescence in calm, subsistence after devastation, climactic and commercial significance, preponderance over the globe, capacity to dissolve and hold all soluble substances in solution, variation of colors, simplicity of its molecular composition, healing virtues, persevering penetrativeness, cleansing and thirst quenching properties, nourishing of vegetation, metamorphoses between states, and its infallibility as paragon and paradigm (488).

Although water is one of the most common things on earth, Bloom does not take it for granted. Instead, he has eyes to see it as a wonder and as a marvelous metaphor that can serve as a source of wisdom for living well in a host of ways. His scientific understanding enhances his relish rather than leading to reductionism. To understand something of the chemistry and physics of water does not exhaust its meaning or take away its mystery. As a self-trained scientist and moral philosopher, Bloom marvels at the properties of water and sees it as metaphorically providing a model for humans living on

earth. For the modern priest of humanism, water is to be fully appreciated, enjoyed, marveled at and a source of profound wisdom. Furthermore, water at the beach is a place of epiphany for both Stephen and Bloom.

### ***Eucharist***

The Eucharist is a sacrament that commemorates Christ's last supper with his disciples that pointed to his sacrifice of himself that was soon to follow. The visible signs are bread and wine, which Catholics believe are transubstantiated into the actual body and blood of Christ. Therefore, the sacrament involves a meal where Christ is ingested by believers together. The meaning of Eucharist is thanksgiving, which seems to exemplify Bloom's life. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen's repentance from his sexual encounters with prostitutes leads to a glorious experience of the Eucharist where with trembling hands he awaited the priest to place the host within his mouth and thought: "Could it be? He knelt there sinless and timid: and he would hold upon his tongue the host and God would enter his purified body . . . Another life! A life of grace and virtue and happiness! It was true. It was not a dream from which he would wake. The past was past" (146).

However, he later becomes weary of "ardent ways" and "enchanted days" as encapsulated in the Eucharist. Instead, as an artist, he sees himself as "a priest of eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life" (*Portrait of the Artist* 221). Although he eschewed the calling to be a Jesuit priest, Stephen embraced the idea of being an artist-priest whereby he could create something new and beautiful that would advance "the eternal affirmation of the spirit of man in literature" (*Ulysses* 483). As noted in the previous chapter, Stephen's view of what it

means to be an artist is deeply colored by concepts of the priest and the Eucharist. As Kevin Sullivan puts it in *Joyce Among the Jesuits*,<sup>20</sup> “the shadow of the priest falls constantly across the work of the artist . . . in *Ulysses* . . . the shadow-structure is the Catholic Mass in which the priest, performing the specific sacrifice for which he was ordained, celebrates the communion of God and man. But the artist secularizes this function of the priest, and his sacrament is a celebration of the communion of humanity” (146). In his art, Joyce seeks to broaden the application of the sacramental approach to address all humanity and to find a basis on which sectarian and political divisions can be overcome through a focus on what humans share in common, which far outweighs the differences.

In *Ulysses*, Bloom is depicted as having the priestly ability to transmute the daily bread of experience, including eating, into the sacred. The introduction to Bloom in Chapter 4 (Calypso) involves him preparing a breakfast of buttered toast and tea to serve to his unfaithful wife, Molly, in bed. His soft movements about the kitchen reflect the priest at the altar consecrating the host and chalice. The toast and tea symbolize the transmuted bread and wine of the Eucharist. Yet, when he brings the food upstairs, she just sleepily grunts and rolls over in bed. This also is the first evidence that Bloom’s efforts to connect with his wife are not reciprocated. However, Bloom seems to commune with the cat as he provides it some warm milk (47-8).

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<sup>20</sup> Sullivan presents a study of Joyce’s Jesuit schooling, which he remained under until almost his twenty-first year. He notes that “Critics of Joyce . . . seem generally agreed that, however various or significant the influences that converge in his work, the earliest, most nearly central, and most pervasive was the Catholicism of his youth . . . Consequently, his Catholicism is as essential to an understanding of Joyce as it is to an understanding of Dante, Cervantes, or Augustine” (1).

Bloom's earthiness is seen in his thoughts about his favorite, grilled mutton kidneys, "which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine" (47). As was the case with water, Bloom does not take food for granted, but savors his meal of kidneys, bread and tea; eating with discernment and relish (56). In the Jewish sacrificial system prescribed in the Book of Leviticus, "The practice was that the two kidneys, together with the fat and part of the liver, were burnt on the altar as Yahweh's portion, while the worshippers no doubt consumed the rest. The kidneys along with the blood and other internal organs were held to contain the life, and the kidneys were regarded as a choice portion, perhaps because of their coating of fat" (Douglas, et al. 653). In Bloom's secular worldview where God does not exist, the best is no longer reserved for the divine, but is available to humankind. In ancient Israel, the kidneys were also thought of as the seat of the innermost moral and emotional impulses (Easton 1) and are symbolic of Bloom's compassionate and moral nature.

The Eucharist is also symbolized in Bloom's providing a cup of coffee and roll for Stephen at the Cabman's Shelter in Chapter 16 (Eumaeus). However, Stephen is not able to stomach much of the "boiling swimming cup of a choice concoction labelled coffee" or the "rather antediluvian specimen of a bun" (452). Nevertheless, the ice has been broken and the protagonists go to Bloom's home where Bloom offers him a cup of cocoa, which they drank in "jocoserious silence" before they engaged in dialogue that allowed them to become much better acquainted (491). Bloom's graciousness as a host is seen in his foregoing using his special cup for himself and pouring some of the cream that he ordinarily reserved for Molly's breakfast into Stephen's cocoa in greater measure than he gave himself.

Through their dialogue we learn that Stephen had actually made the first offer of hospitality to Bloom when he was only five years old and invited Bloom to have dinner with his family, which was seconded by his father, Simon. Although Bloom “Very gratefully, with grateful appreciation, with sincere appreciative gratitude, in appreciatively grateful sincerity of regret” declined the offer, it obviously made a great impression on him as Bloom was typically treated as an outsider despite his several acquaintances (493). What is ingested into the body ultimately comes out of the body. At Stephen’s suggestion and Bloom’s instigation, they urinated together shortly before they parted ways; an improvised male bonding ritual that demonstrated the degree of trust and intimacy that their time together had achieved (510). Real communion with others through the most basic of life’s physical necessities appears to lie at the heart of secular sacraments as those who have shared a meal or cup of cocoa can attest.

### ***Confirmation***

In the Roman Catholic Church, Confirmation is associated with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is typically envisioned as descending from heaven in a manner similar to his alighting on Christ during his baptism by John the Baptist. However, during his epiphany of rebirth on the beach in *Portrait of the Artist*, Stephen imagines his soul “soaring sunward . . . soaring in an air beyond the world and the body” (169). Stephen sees himself in the likeness of his namesake, Daedalus, the great artificer of Greek mythology who constructed wings of feathers, twine and wax so that he and his son Icarus could flee from the captivity of King Minos on the island of Crete.

Instead of a dove, the metaphor that Stephen uses for the free flight of his soul toward the sun and over the sea is that of a hawklike man, “a symbol of the artist forging



anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable being” (169). Yet, it is the beautiful young girl in the sea whose “bosom was as a bird’s soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of a darkplumaged dove” (171) that leads to the climax of Stephen’s epiphany. Therefore, the image of dove as source of spiritual conversion is not overthrown. The imagery of the hawk is also applied to Stephen in a deprecating way in *Ulysses* when John Eglinton says, “Fabulous artificer. The hawklike man. You flew. Where to? Newhaven-Dieppe, steerage passage. Paris and back. Lapwing. Icarus. Pater, ait. Seabedabbled, fallen, weltering. Lapwing you are. Lapwing be” (177). Indeed, through much of *Ulysses*, Stephen seems to be more reminiscent of the son Icarus who flew too close to the sun and plunged to his death in the sea than the brilliant father, Daedalus.

Hopes for the struggling artist are rekindled as Bloom begins to take Stephen under his wing in Chapter 17 (Ithaca), which is written in the form of a catechesis or dialogue with questions and answers that help Stephen and Bloom to get to know one another and to share their different perspectives on life. Catechesis typically precedes Confirmation to ensure the individual is solidly grounded in the truths of the faith. Here the young artist-priest is inculcated into the ways of the secular humanist-priest by his more mature companion. Bloom seems to bear what the Bible would call the fruit of the Spirit in his life as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control all seem like apt descriptions of his character. A father-son relationship has been established between the protagonists, which it appears will lead to flourishing for both.

### ***Penance/Reconciliation***

Penance/Reconciliation is another sacrament alluded to in *Ulysses*. Stephen struggles with deep guilt as he wonders if his refusal to take the Eucharist at Easter was the cause of his mother's death. In addition to his own conscience accusing him, Buck Mulligan says to him, "You could have knelt down, damn it, Kinch, when your dying mother asked you . . . I'm as hyperborean as much as you. But to think of your mother begging you with her last breath to kneel down and pray for her. And you refused. There is something sinister in you" (6). Initially, it seems that Stephen's pride is a barrier to repentance and finding reconciliation as he rudely says during a discussion in the National Library that "A man of genius makes no mistakes. His errors are volitional and are the portals of discovery" (160). Although Bloom also feels guilt at times, he has learned a more positive way to deal with it.

One example occurs on the Sandymont Strand in Chapter 13 (Nausicaa) when Bloom has finished masturbating while watching the beautiful young Irish girl, Gerty MacDowell, expose her thighs and undergarments. His contrition is evident as he "stands silent, with bowed head before those young guileless eyes. What a brute he had been! At it again? A fair unsullied soul had called to him and, wretch that he was, how had he answered? An utter cad he had been! He of all men! But there was an infinite store of mercy in those eyes, for him too a word of pardon even though he had erred and sinned and wandered" (310). Once again, Bloom's secularity does not preclude a genuine sense of morality. Rather than seeking a priest to confess his sins, Bloom sees forgiveness, acceptance and understanding in the eyes of the one he thinks he has offended. The organ music, singing, and words of the priests from a men's temperance retreat in a church

nearby echoes the ideas of how the sacred can be reflected in the secular. Rather than appealing to the Virgin Mary like the men in the church, Bloom finds grace in Gerty's acceptance and understanding eyes.

The nightmarish hallucinations that Bloom and Stephen experience at the brothel in Chapter 15 (Circe) is one in which the subconscious of each seems to accuse him of nagging faults that he has committed. However, Bloom has come to understand that one must be able to forgive others in order to forgive oneself. In Chapter 17 (Ithaca), Bloom lists over twenty men who have had sexual liaisons with his wife, including Blazes Boylan, who he knows was with her that very evening. Bloom's response moves from envy and jealousy to abnegation and equanimity. He sees the sexual attraction "as natural as any and every natural act of a nature expressed or understood executed in nature by natural creatures in accordance with his, her and their natured natures, of dissimilar similarity" (532).

Despite his rationalizations, Bloom does not remain indifferent to his wife's adultery, but continues to try to win her back, to be fully reconciled as husband and wife. This explains the ritual in which "He kissed the plump mellow yellow smellow melons of her rump, on each plump melonous hemisphere, in their mellow yellow furrow, obscure prolonged provocative melonsmellonous osculation" (534). Bloom's regularly repeated ritual recalls Roman Catholic priests kissing the altar during the Mass. As a man full of compassion who appreciates the fragility of human nature, Bloom seems to have patience for every sin except intolerance as seen during his altercation with the citizen in Chapter 12 (Cyclops).

In a hallucination during the brothel scene in Chapter 15, Stephen seems to struggle between the feeling that he needs to repent and his assertion of freedom as an artist. Like the Prodigal Son, he reflects on “Filling my belly with husks of swine. Too much of this. I will arise and go to my” (396). According to the parable, the word “father” would naturally follow, but Stephen’s biological father, Simon, is also dissolute. As his dead mother wrings her hands and moans “O Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on him! Save him from hell. O Divine Sacred Heart!,” Stephen cries out “No! No! No! Break my spirit, all of you, if you can! I’ll bring you all to heel!” and smashes the chandelier in the brothel with his ashplant (430).

In Bloom, Stephen finds a father figure he can go to who can help him reconcile himself with the world and with himself. Bloom’s concept of penance is to seek to ameliorate the suffering, pain and hardships of others while accepting them with all their faults. He “desired to amend many social conditions, the product of inequality and avarice and international animosity” (506). For him, satisfaction could be described as “To have sustained no positive loss. To have brought a positive gain to others. Light to the gentiles” (491). As an ethnic Jewish humanist, Bloom sees himself as undertaking the Messianic duty assigned to Christ and the promise to Abraham that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

### *Anointing of the Sick*

The Roman Catholic Church seeks to provide healing for body, mind and spirit and consolation at death’s door through the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, which was formerly known as the Last Rites. When Stephen arrives at Bloom’s home near the end of *Ulysses*, he is haggard, hungry and tired. He is thin, drawn, disheveled and his

jacket has a large hole in it. He was recently punched in the face by a soldier he offended through a perceived insult of the king. One can imagine that he very much looks like the Prodigal Son. However, Stephen also appears sick in his soul as he tries to reconcile the guilt he feels without a means of religious consolation. Bloom sees Stephen as having “Confidence in himself, an equal and opposite power of abandonment and recuperation.” Bloom seeks to begin to meet Stephen’s physical needs for food, rest and recuperation while also encouraging him. Stephen is not yet ready to accept all that Bloom has to offer by way of washing with soap and water as a type of anointing, but his words are likely to have done more for him than any priestly prayer could.

After having his bee sting anointed with a salve at the hospital, Bloom also seeks to visit his friend, Mina Purefoy, who is having a difficult childbirth. While Punch Costello loudly sings a bawdy song that leads to a shushing by the nurse, “the good sir Leopold that had for his cognizance the flower of quiet, margerain gentle, advising also the time’s occasion as most sacred and most worthy to be most sacred” tries to quiet them down (327). Bloom views birth and life as something sacred while the medical students and others at the hospital profane it.

Bloom is a friend until death.<sup>21</sup> He attends the funeral of his friend Paddy Dignam, but he also initiates and gives generously to a collection for his widow and children and seeks to work out the difficulties with Paddy’s encumbered life insurance by speaking with an attorney. Bloom has no hope that the soul lives on after death and

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<sup>21</sup> Burgess notes that “In the graveyard, while Dignam’s body is being committed to the earth, [Bloom] is aware of death as that and no more—the failure of a pump. It is not the opening of a door on to ultimate reality . . . But we remember that the word ‘heart’ has another connotation, and that this fits Bloom very well. He is body, opposition and complement to Stephen Dedalus’s intellect, but he is also feeling, warmth, love . . . we shall see that this is the very quality which marks off Bloom from the rest of weak, irresponsible, cadging Dublin” (114).

reflects: “We are praying now for the repose of his soul. Hoping you’re well and not in hell. Nice change of air. Out of the frying pan of life into the fire of purgatory” (94). Yet, he takes it upon himself to be a blessing to the living and to honor the life of the deceased with his presence at the funeral. In contrast, another so-called friend who does not plan to attend the funeral asks Bloom to add his name to the list of attendees, which will appear in the newspaper.

### *Holy Orders*

The sacrament of Holy Orders is also alluded to in *Ulysses* as Bloom is described in prophetic terms at the end of Chapter 12 (Cyclops). Following his confrontation with the citizen who is the epitome of a bigoted and narrow-minded Irish nationalist, Bloom drives away in a car, which is described in the following manner:

When, lo, there came about them all a great brightness and they beheld the chariot wherein He stood ascend to heaven. And they beheld Him in the chariot, clothed upon in the glory of his brightness, having raiment as of the sun, fair as the moon and terrible that for awe they durst not look upon Him. And there came a voice out of heaven, calling: Elijah! Elijah! And He answered with a main cry: Abba! Adonai! And they beheld Him even Him, ben Bloom Elijah, amid clouds of angels ascend to the glory of the brightness at an angle fortyfive degrees over Donohoe’s in Little Green street like a shot off a shovel. (296)

The car he drives away in appears like the chariot of fire drawn with fiery horses that swooped down to Earth and whisked the prophet Elijah up into heaven. Although normally meek and mild mannered, Bloom cannot remain silent in the face of the

aspersions against Jews spewed at him by the citizen and declares that “Your God was a Jew. Christ was a Jew like me” (294).

As a prophet, Bloom is compelled to speak against misplaced Irish nationalism that leads to divisions between human beings. Even though it takes place in a hallucination, Bloom’s true feelings seem to show forth when he says, “I stand for the reform of municipal morals and the plain ten commandments. New worlds for old. Union of all, Jew, Moslem and Gentile” (381). Religious and national differences seem much less important to Bloom than the commonalities that humans share.

As noted in the discussion above concerning the other sacraments, Bloom is also a secular priest. His view of all of life in a sacramental sense is perhaps best seen in his recapitulation of his day in Chapter 17:

The preparation of breakfast (burnt offering): intestinal congestion and premeditative defecation (holy of holies): the bath (rite of John): the funeral (rite of Samuel): the advertisement of Alexander Keyes (Urim and Thummim): the unsubstantial lunch (rite of Melchisedek): the visit to museum and national library (holy place): the bookhunt along Bedford row, Merchants’ Arch, Wellington Quay (Simchath Torah): the music in Ormond Hotel (Shira Shirim): the altercation with a truculent troglodyte in Bernard Kiernan’s premises (holocaust): a blank period of time including a cardrive, a visit to a house of mourning, a leavetaking (wilderness): the eroticism produced by feminine exhibitionism (rite of Onan): the prolonged delivery of Mrs Mina Purefoy (heave offering): the visit to the disorderly house of Mrs Bella Cohen, 82 Tyrone Street, lower and

subsequent brawl and chance medley in Beaver street (Armageddon) – nocturnal perambulation to and from the cabman’s shelter, Butt Bridge (atonement). (529)

Like Stephen, Bloom’s mind is full of imagery from the Old and New Testaments.

Although he is secular to the core, Bloom relies on the meaning inherent in these Biblical symbols and references to express the sacramental way in which he perceives all of life.

### ***Marriage***

The last of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church to be covered is marriage. Bloom seems to affirm the goodness of procreation in his loving relationship with his daughter Milly, his desire to have another son to replace Rudy, and in the manner in which he approaches Mina Purefoy’s giving birth as noted earlier. Yet, both Stephen and Bloom see sex as something to enjoy apart from having children.

In many ways, the relationship between Bloom and his wife Molly<sup>22</sup> seems far from idyllic. Molly’s frequent trysts with a variety of paramours is common knowledge not only to Bloom, but to their circle of acquaintances. Bloom engages in flirtations with other women and has not had sexual intercourse with his wife for over ten years, since the passing of Rudy. In one sense their relationship seems totally dysfunctional. Even though it is not stated, it is implied that Rudy’s death was a trauma that affected their relationship. Nevertheless, Bloom continues to pursue Molly and all other women that he thinks about ultimately lead him back to her. Although she is nothing like his intellectual equal, he is proud of her beauty and singing talent. He makes her breakfast in bed every

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<sup>22</sup> In *ReJoyce*, Anthony Burgess notes that Molly’s full name is Marion Tweedy and “‘Tweedy’ suggests the weaving of Penelope, whose counterpart she is . . . We are to meet Molly as Penelope only in the final chapter; here [Chapter 4] she appears as Calypso, nymph of an island with a great cave at its navel”(107).



morning and tries to find things that she will delight in like perfumed lotion, lingerie, cream for her breakfast, and a sexually titillating book.

The last chapter of *Ulysses* (Penelope) is told in Molly's voice. As Molly reminisces about her courtship with Bloom she recalls his words to her as they were lying among the rhododendrons on Howth head in Gibraltar: "the sun shines for you today" and that she was "a flower of the mountain" (563). But it was not just his ability to flatter her that appealed to Molly. She liked him because she saw that "he understood or felt what a woman is" (563). Molly seems to realize that she has bloomed as a mountain flower because Leopold has been there to faithfully water her life. It seems that there has also been a change in Leopold as he asks Molly to serve him breakfast in bed for the first time in several years. We are not told why Leopold would change from serving her breakfast to asking her to serve him, but his deeper relationship with Stephen seems to have brought some kind of healing. Perhaps their discussion a few hours before helped him to realize that reciprocity in giving will also be good for Molly and his relationship with her.

Molly, in her highly sensual way, concludes the book by recalling Bloom's proposal of marriage and her acceptance: "I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes" (563). Molly affirms the goodness of her husband and her marriage. The reader seems to be left with hope that their commitment to each other through hard times has led to an opportunity for revitalization in their union.

*Priests of Science and Art, Spirit and Flesh*

Not all those who are secular can live sacramentally. In the first chapter of *Ulysses*, Stephen's roommate, Buck Mulligan, styles himself as a pagan priest and mocks the Eucharist while conducting his morning shave. In his article, "The Priesthoods of Stephen and Buck," Robert Boyle notes that "Buck appears as usurping priest on the opening pages of *Ulysses*. The stately diction and sentence structure reflect the ritual imagery of the mass . . . Buck as priest should be girdled and tonsured, but he is not, and his role as usurper is stressed" (41-2). Wearing a yellow dressing gown, Buck holds his shaving bowl, on which a mirror and razor lay crossed, aloft and intones "Introibo ad altare Dei" (go to the altar of God) (*Ulysses* 4).

Buck, a bright, young medical student, is depicted as a usurper who parasitically draws his life from others. Although Stephen would not take communion at Easter even to satisfy his dying mother's wish, he does not seem to find Buck's sarcastic portrayal of the sacrament to be funny. Boyle sees the priesthood of Buck as one of science and that of Stephen as one of art (57). Buck's scientific materialism leads him to denigrate life as essentially meaningless and leaves him with no metaphysical basis for morality. This relegates other people and the world to be reduced to objects that can be abused to selfishly satisfy his every whim.

Bloom also has a scientific perspective, but one that is joined to a humanism that ennobles rather than belittles life. In contrast to Buck, Bloom's meditation on why he shaves at night, which occurs near the end of the book, seems to transform the mundane into the sublime (489). Buck is a secular and profane jester. Bloom, on the other hand, is

secular, but treats all of life as sacred—worthy of reverence, respect, and understanding. Buck sucks life out of others while Bloom gives his life for the betterment of others.

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud quotes Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as follows: ‘He who possesses science and art also has religion, but he who possesses neither of those two, let him have religion.’ Regarding this passage, Freud notes that “This saying on the one hand draws an antithesis between religion and the two highest achievements of man, and on the other, asserts that, as regards their value in life, those achievements and religion can represent or replace each other” (Freud 771). The two protagonists in *Ulysses* together are intended by Joyce to represent an alternative approach to organized and orthodox religion. The two temperaments that Bloom and Stephen individually represent are the scientific and the artistic, respectively (495). Just as Stephen and Bloom seem to complete each other in a sense, so science and art are seen by Goethe, Freud and apparently Joyce as being necessary if one would replace religion in its typically expressed form.

In addition, to representing art and science, Stephen and Bloom also represent the spirit and the flesh, respectively. Rather than being opposed to each other, Joyce shows that these two fundamental aspects of our humanity are intended to complement and complete one another. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, Telemachus longed for his father Odysseus to return from battle in Troy. He and his mother, Penelope, and their estate were being wasted by the despoiling suitors and they were helpless until Odysseus returned to bring justice and restore order. The bedraggled and beat up Stephen has aspirations of soaring upward as an artist, but he is at the mercy of usurpers like Buck. In order to fly, he will need help in fashioning wings made of feathers, wax and string—the material stuff of the

world. As Anthony Burgess indicates in *ReJoyce*,<sup>23</sup> Stephen “seems to enclose the universe of words and ideas; yet, ironically he does not enclose the lowlier Bloom . . . He needs, and the book needs to be brought down to earth . . . Stephen stands for the spirit and Bloom<sup>24</sup> for the flesh” (106). If Stephen would soar upward to universals, he must first be grounded in particulars.

Bloom seems to take a modified Aristotelian approach to science and moral philosophy; modified in the sense that he embraces the scientific method that came after Aristotle’s time. In Chapter 9 (Scylla and Charybdis) of *Ulysses*, which takes place in the National Library, Stephen champions Aristotle against the literary critics/writers who favor Plato when he says, “That model schoolboy [Aristotle], would find Hamlet’s musings about the afterlife of his princely soul, the improbable, insignificant and undramatic monologue, as shallow as Plato’s” and he adds to that “Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past” (156).

From an Aristotelian perspective, the soul ceases to exist when the body dies. From a Platonic viewpoint, the soul survives the body, which is a prison house for the soul. Since its inception, Christianity has struggled with a body-soul dualism that seems more in keeping with Plato’s views as discussed in Chapter 2. As Wendell Berry notes:

In denying the holiness of the body and of the so-called physical reality of the world—and in denying support to the good economy, the good work, by which

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<sup>23</sup> In his Foreword to *ReJoyce*, Burgess indicates that his desire is to help the average reader who wants to know Joyce’s work but has been scared off by the professors. He notes that “The appearance of difficulty is part of Joyce’s big joke, the profundities are always expressed in good round Dublin terms; Joyce’s heroes are humble men. If ever there was a writer for the people, Joyce was that writer.” Burgess indicates that his intention is to provide a pilot-commentary to help readers through *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake*.

<sup>24</sup> Burgess notes that “As for Bloom’s own name—an anglicisation of the ancestral Hungarian Virag, which means a flower—it sums up pretty well what its owner stands for: something remarkable but unpretentious springing out of common earth” (106).

alone the Creation can receive due honor—modern Christianity generally has cut itself off from both nature and culture. It has no serious or competent interest in biology or ecology. And it is equally uninterested in the arts by which humankind connects itself to nature. It manifests no awareness of the specifically Christian cultural lineages that connect us to our past. (Berry 113)

Bloom and Stephen as modern secular priests seem to be reclaiming the goodness of nature and culture that much of Christianity often seems to deny. As Burgess indicates: “perhaps without knowing it, [Stephen] will best free himself from the Church’s domination by secularizing the emotions attached to her rites and symbols. Stephen, secular Jesuit, heretic Franciscan, is less mixed-up than he seems” (66). It is important to add that Aristotle provides a basis for virtuous living that he thinks will lead to human happiness and flourishing apart from the notion of divine revelation, judgment, or an afterlife.

### ***Conclusion***

In *Portrait of the Artist*, James Joyce raised issues that seem to beg for resolution. How will the young artist, even with all his brilliance, be able to create great literature when he seems alienated from the rest of the world? Stephen seems to feel the need to sever all ties, including relationships, in order to pursue his own way with unfettered freedom. His university classmate, Cranly, questioned how Stephen could hope to thrive without at least one close, trusted friend and without having learned to love others. Cranly’s prediction appears to come true as Stephen seems to be largely wasting his life until he comes in contact with Bloom.

Bloom as secular prophet and priest demonstrates for Stephen how the world can retain its sacredness and connectedness apart from the Church and nationalism. Through secular sacraments and sacramental living, Bloom as scientist and humanist joins with the young artist to exemplify what Joyce appears to represent as the true hope for the modern world. In *Ulysses*, Joyce invites his readers on an epic internal journey to embrace embodiment, the material world and human nature with all its foibles and capacity for greatness. If they say yes, yes, yes to such things, who knows what might bloom in a day or a lifetime?

Joyce represents a Roman Catholic who fell away from the Church and became a secular author who retained a sacramental imagination. The next two chapters will cover Flannery O'Connor who remained a devout Catholic from her birth until her early death. In a letter to Father J. H. McCown, O'Connor advised him that at some point reading Catholic fiction writers "reaches the place of diminishing returns and you get more benefit reading someone like Hemmingway, where there is apparently a hunger for a Catholic completeness in life, or Joyce who can't get rid of it no matter what he does. It may be a matter of recognizing the Holy Ghost in fiction by the way He chooses to conceal himself (130). As a Catholic author, O'Connor recognizes the value of reading Joyce with his penchant for a Catholic completeness in life that he cannot shake even though he may try to conceal it.

O'Connor mentions Joyce as one of the great authors she was first introduced to in graduate school (98). According to Mary Lowe-Evans, Joyce was very much a literary figure that O'Connor was responding to. She notes that Joyce's name is invoked six times in O'Connor's short story, "The Enduring Chill" (132). When O'Connor was writing,

Joyce's reputation as the century's premier modernist writer loomed as "the sine qua non against whom all who aspired to literary greatness felt compelled to measure themselves" (132). Lowe-Evans also suggests that since O'Connor sought tirelessly to inspire faith in others that Joyce's status as lapsed Catholic led to her responding to him as part of an attempt to undercut the secularity of her era and to guide the unbelieving toward belief (132, 153). Thus, Lowe-Evans argues that O'Connor "assumes a Mary-like mission in attempting to put James Joyce back in his Catholic place" (157). In any case, comparing and contrasting the sacramental imagination of a lapsed Catholic with a devout one, will hopefully provide an interesting juxtaposition that will shed greater light on the significance of sacramental imagery in modern fiction.

## Chapter 6

### The Shocking Sacramental Artistry of a Catholic Author

#### Flannery O'Connor

If one were to ask who are the most famous mystery writers of the twentieth century, names like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie, P.D. James, John le Carré would likely be mentioned. But there is one prominent author whose name would likely be found missing from most people's list of mystery writers: Flannery O'Connor (1925-1964). Yet, O'Connor's fiction is above all about the uncovering of mysteries—mysteries that can never be fully disclosed because they are both immanent and transcendent. Rather than clever detectives and spies like Sherlock Holmes, Adam Dalgliesch, Hercule Poirot, or George Smiley who seek to solve crimes and thwart foreign adversaries, O'Connor's protagonists often unwittingly confront even greater mysteries in the outwardly mundane environs of the rural South. As O'Connor noted, "The type of mind that can understand good fiction is not necessarily an 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 (*MM* 79). The sacramental imagination connects reality with mystery and deepens one's understanding of both. Murders and mayhem, violence and vengeance, the shocking and the grotesque are all means that O'Connor employs to help her protagonists and readers come face to face with the mystery underlying all reality. Though her approach is frequently shocking, it is also fundamentally sacramental.

While her literary gifts are widely recognized as placing her among the greatest of Southern writers, perhaps few modern authors have been more misunderstood than



O'Connor. After a woman from Boston who identified herself as a Catholic read O'Connor's short story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," she wrote O'Connor a letter indicating "she couldn't understand how anybody could HAVE such thoughts" (*HB* 82). To be sure, O'Connor's fiction is replete with the shocking, the violent, and the grotesque that easily upset readers seeking moral uplift by sweeter means. As André Bleikasten summarizes this aspect of O'Connor's fiction in "Writing on the Flesh: Tattoos and Taboos in 'Parker's Back,'" "disquieting strangeness [is] apt to arise at every turn out of the most intimately familiar, and through which our everyday sense of reality is made to yield to the troubling awareness of the world's otherness" (8). Shocking as it may be, O'Connor's work is also filled with sacramental imagery, which discloses the linkage between divine mystery and the sensual world. She sees a sacramental imagination as necessary to write fiction that delves into realms of profounder meaning. Seeing how the shocking and the sacramental seamlessly combine in her work is critical to comprehending her life's project.

Like Joyce, O'Connor's writing was deeply influenced by her Catholic upbringing. Yet, while Joyce became a catholic writer, O'Connor always remained a Catholic author. Both are modern poets and prophets of the eternal imagination. Both had sacramental imaginations that they employed to help their readers see transcendent realities lying beneath the surface of their everyday lives and their inner selves. Yet, while Joyce's approach is fundamentally secular, O'Connor's method is suffused by sacred sensibilities. Considering O'Connor's distinctly Catholic sacramental approach in her fiction will help in developing an understanding of how sacramental allusions work more generally.

First, it is important to understand the importance of O'Connor's identify as a Catholic author and how that relates to her general approach as well as the nature and substance of her work. Having sought to sketch the depth of O'Connor's spirituality, I will then demonstrate the importance of a sacramental approach to fiction from her perspective based on essays, speeches, and letters she wrote. Because a sacramental way of seeing the world has largely been lost in modernity, it is important to consider how O'Connor seeks to prophetically communicate with an audience that does not generally share her vision of reality. She seamlessly employs ascetic, violent, deathly, grotesque, and tragicomic elements to awaken her readers and to make the restoration of sacramental vision possible.

Next, I will provide specific examples of her use of sacramental imagery particularly focusing on one novel, *The Violent Bear it Away*, and two short stories, "The River" and "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," which were selected based on the prominence of sacramental allusions. Lastly, O'Connor's short story "The Enduring Chill" will be explored as a direct response to Joyce's elevation of the artist to godlike status. Through what has been said about these and selected other works, I will engage with the critical conversation about her sacramental artistry and imagination.

This discussion will coalesce around several threads that contribute to the rich sacramental tapestry of her work, including how her sacramental imagination relates to the following themes: body-soul dualism; seeing the world sacramentally; love as the heart of sacramental theology; the basis for human value; failing to connect versus connecting with the cosmos; volition and vocation; satisfying human hunger; moving from hopelessness to wholeness; the search for significance; childlike faith and the gap

between knowing and unknowing; and grace in the grotesque. Lastly, I will discuss how her work is in some sense a response to the lapsed Catholic author that was covered in the previous two chapters, Joyce. Comparing and contrasting O'Connor's approach with that of Joyce, will show how sacramental symbols and allusions can be powerfully applied from fundamentally different perspectives to reveal mysteries lying below the surface of modernity and post-modernity.

### ***A Catholic Writer Centered on the Sacraments***

O'Connor was born into a Roman Catholic family and her childhood home in Savannah, Georgia was located just a block away from the massive French Gothic Cathedral of St. John the Baptist where her family attended mass. As one of her biographers, Brad Gooch, notes, "The often-repeated Savannah comment that Flannery O'Connor 'was conceived in the shadow of the cathedral' is not entirely rhetorical. Looming through her parents' bedroom windows were always its pale green twin spires, topped by gold crosses" (18). She summarizes her relationship to the Catholic Church as follows: "I am a born Catholic, went to Catholic schools in my early years, and have never left or wanted to leave the Church" (*HB* 114). She clearly sees that growing up in the Church was the most formative influence on her life. Even in comparison with writers who were Catholic converts, she saw a distinction: "They have been formed by other things, I have been formed by the Church" (*HB* 115). The Church with its sacraments, doctrine, and visibly arresting imagery were sown into her receptive and fertile imagination from birth. They were the air she breathed and would later poetically respire.

Concerning O'Connor's place of birth where she lived with her parents until she was thirteen, William Sessions notes in the "Introduction" to *A Prayer Journal*, "For her,

Savannah had opened up more than the diversity of human existence. There a series of Catholic rituals and teachings had offered her young life a coherent universe” (vii). Growing up Catholic had given her a worldview, a coherent way of seeing the cosmos. Rather than rebelling against her Catholic upbringing like Joyce, she embraced it wholeheartedly. Catholicism seems to have fit O’Connor well. As she notes, “My background and inclinations are both Catholic” (*HB* 68).

Although obviously possessing a keen intellect, she affirms with St. Augustine that “you must believe in order to understand, not understand in order to believe” (*HB* 370). Grounded in the Church’s teaching and sacraments, O’Connor was ready to fully engage competing cultural ideologies. Noting the pervasiveness of nihilism in her own day, she says, “If I hadn’t had the Church to fight it with or to tell me the necessity of fighting it, I would be the stinkiest logical positivist you ever saw right now” (*CW* 949). Apart from growing up in the Church, O’Connor has no confidence that she would have come to faith solely through her rationale intellect. Elsewhere, she indicates that “All voluntary baptisms [i.e., those not administered to the infants of believing parents] are a miracle to me and stop my mouth as much as if I had just seen Lazarus walk out of the tomb. I suppose it’s because I know that it had to be given me before the age of reason, or I wouldn’t have used any reason to find it” (*CW* 982).

This is not to suggest that the Christian faith is anti-rational, only that O’Connor sees faith as a gift that serves as the starting point for right thinking. As she indicates, “what one has as a born Catholic is something given and accepted before it is experienced. I am only slowly coming to experience things that I have all along accepted” (*CW* 949). O’Connor believed what the Church taught from the time she was

very young, but gradually came to understand those teachings experientially and intellectually in a deeper level over time.

However, O'Connor downplays the need for faith to be emotionally satisfying (*HB* 100), describing her own faith as follows: "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, 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" (*HB* 92). Yet, her faith was real, vibrant, and personal as evidenced by the prayer journal she kept from January 1946 (before her twenty-first birthday) to September 1947 when she was in Iowa City. Initially, she had gone there to study journalism, but switched to a Masters of Fine Arts graduate writing program by the second semester. The following excerpt from her *Prayer Journal* gives a sense of how her Catholic piety poetically combines with her sacramental imagination at a relatively young age:

Dear God, I cannot love Thee the way I want to. You are the slim crescent of a moon that I see and my self is the earth's shadow that keeps me from seeing all the moon. The crescent is very beautiful and perhaps that is all one like I am should or could see; but what I am afraid of, dear God, is that my self shadow will grow so large that it blocks the whole moon, and that I will judge myself by the shadow that is nothing. (3)

In addition, to her prayer journal, her letters (collected in *The Habit of Being*), and her occasional prose (collected in *Mystery and Manners*), evidence how her Catholicism deeply impacts her fiction.

In a letter to Sessions, O'Connor indicated that she made her First Communion when she was six years and old and noted that "it seemed as natural to me and about as startling as brushing my teeth" (*HB* 164). The Eucharist was not only natural for O'Connor from the time she was young, it was also the center of her existence. One evening around 1949 or 1950, she was invited by some friends to have dinner with author Mary McCarthy (1912-1989) and her husband. McCarthy had left the Roman Catholic Church at the age of 15 and had a reputation of being a "Big Intellectual." She was later to write *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1957). When the conversation eventually turned to the Eucharist, McCarthy noted that when she received the Host as a child, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, but now she thought of it as a pretty good symbol. O'Connor's response was "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it." O'Connor went on to note that "That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable" (*HB* 125). This statement is telling for two reasons. First, it demonstrates how central the Eucharist was to her life. Secondly, she could only say more about it through her stories. Indeed, she had more to say about the Eucharist in her stories as will be discussed later in this chapter.

O'Connor believes that the sacraments also have ethical dimensions. Apparently, responding to Dr. T. R. Spivey's assertion that the Eucharist is not so important and can wait until he learns how to better love God and his neighbor, she argues that "Christ gave us the sacraments in order that we might better keep the two great commandments. You will learn about Catholic belief by studying the sacramental life of the Church. The center of this is the Eucharist" (*HB* 346). In O'Connor's view, one cannot really grasp Catholic

belief or live out the Christian imperatives apart from understanding the way all of the Church's life is informed by the sacraments. Again, she emphasizes that within the centrality of the sacraments, the Eucharist is the absolute center. According to O'Connor, the sacraments aid one in being good. However, because the Church is "mighty realistic about human nature" (*HB* 346), the sacrament of penance is available when believers fall short. While she does not deny that following Church rituals can become "mechanical and merely habit," she disagrees that most Catholics go about their religion mechanically. Being held to the Church by habit is something she considers better than not being held at all. Furthermore, she downplays the need for emotional response. On the contrary, she states that "We don't believe that grace is something you have to feel. The Catholic always distrusts his emotional reaction to the sacraments" (*HB* 346). The sacraments also have vocational significance.

O'Connor saw being Catholic as central and essential to her work as a writer. She provides many insights on this relationship in a letter to "A." dated July 20, 1955. In this letter, she indicates that "I write the way I do because (not though) I am a Catholic" (*CW* 942). She picks up this theme in a letter to John Lynch where she laments: "the ironical part of my silent reception by Catholics is that I write the way I do because and only because I am a Catholic. I feel that if I were not, I would have no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything" (*CW* 966). A Catholic upbringing and education supplies an entire worldview and "sense of history" (*HB* 350) to help make sense of what she sees. Furthermore, it is the lens for seeing the conflict between how the world is versus how it was intended to be. This provides such rich perspective that she feels that "being a Catholic has saved me a couple of thousand

years in learning to write” (*CW* 966). What she sees is often horrifying because of the disjunction between the ideal and the real. As a person of faith, she seeks “to work out dramatically what it would be like without it” believing that “everything is ultimately saved or lost” (*HB* 350). O’Connor contends that everyone is either moving toward God or away from Him.

From O’Connor’s perspective, the duty of a Catholic writer is nothing more than to reflect what they see the most of (*CW* 967). When asked how being a Catholic affected her work, she responded “it was a great help” (*HB* 352). However, when asked if she was a Catholic writer, she sometimes said “yes” and at other times said “no,” noting that “the question seems too remote from what I am doing when I am doing it, that it doesn’t bother me at all” (*HB* 353). As a writer, O’Connor focuses on faithfully rendering the real world as she sees it, not in writing works that others would necessarily identify as Catholic. Nonetheless, she recognizes that the eyes that she sees with are those of a Catholic. She indicates that her vision, perception, and sensitivity were “given me whole by faith because I couldn’t possibly have arrived at it by my own powers” (*HB* 352-3). O’Connor sees both her faith and her abilities as an artist as gifts from God. Seeing reality is the gift of faith; rendering it faithfully is the gift of artistry. They are in one sense separate gifts, but so inextricably joined in her life that they seamlessly converge.

Growing up in the predominantly Protestant South, O’Connor had plenty of opportunities to view her Catholic faith in juxtaposition to that of the “separated brethren.” She is unapologetic in her belief that Catholicism has many advantages over Protestantism, noting that “The religion of the South is a do-it-yourself religion, something which I as a Catholic find painful and touching and grimly comic. It’s full of



unconscious pride that lands them in all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically” (*HB* 350). Whereas Catholics determine what is true based on what the Church teaches, Protestants follow their own individual understanding of what is true and are therefore more likely to fall into heresy.

What Protestants particularly lack to correct their heresies is that “they have no sacraments” (*HB* 350). Of course, O’Connor realizes that most of the Southern Protestants recognize baptism and the Eucharist (or Lord’s Supper) as sacraments. However, by viewing the Eucharist as merely a symbol, rather than the real body and blood of Christ (*HB* 341), she believes that they largely empty it of its life-giving power and fail to make it the center of their lives. Similarly, she considers baptism, around which she built her novel *The Violent Bear it Away*, as “a subject not calculated to be of interest to many” (*HB* 341), presumably including her Protestant readers. She sees the Protestants’ general lack of proper emphasis on the sacraments as weakening their grasp on the sacramental nature of life itself.

O’Connor is highly skeptical of an emotional engagement in religion that she sees as characteristic of Protestantism. In a letter to Sessions, she notes, “Having been a Protestant, you may have the feeling that you must feel you believe; perhaps feeling belief is not always an illusion but I imagine it is most of the time” (*HB* 164). She went even further in a letter to “A.” noting that “I must say that the thought of everyone lolling about in an emotionally satisfying faith is repugnant to me. I believe that we are ultimately directed Godward but that this journey is often impeded by emotion” (100). O’Connor’s faith is grounded in trust, not feelings. As she put it, “We don’t believe that

grace is something you have to feel. The Catholic always distrusts his emotional response to the sacraments” (*HB* 346). Although it is reasonable not to ground faith in God on emotions, O’Connor seems overly suspicious of the positive role of emotions in the Christian life. This emotional detachment seems to come across in her fiction.

In contrast to love, which suggests tenderness, she believes that “grace can be violent or would have to be to compete with the kind of evil I can make concrete” (*HB* 373). She contends that “In the Protestant view . . . Grace and nature don’t have much to do with each other” (*HB* 389). This may be directly related to the lack of a sacramental way of perceiving the world. In contrast, she sees the Catholic way of thinking about grace as “us[ing] as its medium the imperfect, purely human, and even hypocritical” (*HB* 389). As God takes material means like bread, wine, water, and oil and makes them effective conveyors of his grace in the sacraments, so He is able to take other types of ordinary matter and fallen people and use them as means of grace as well. As an example, she indicates that the grandmother in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is a medium of grace to the Misfit despite her “hypocrisy and humanness and banality” (*HB* 389-90). Based on her stories, O’Connor seems to delight in showing how God’s grace comes in the most unlikely ways to the most unlikely people.

Despite her belief that Catholicism has many advantages over Protestantism, O’Connor retains a sense of solidarity with good Protestants and sees them as fellow Christians. In a letter to Maryat Lee, she said “I am glad that you find me a good Protestant. That is indeed a compliment. All good Catholics have the best Protestant qualities about them; and a good deal more besides” (*HB* 418). While there are obvious distinctions, she sees fundamentalist Protestants as having much in common with

Catholics. As she indicates in a letter to Spivey, “The fact is though now that the fundamentalist Protestants, as far as doctrine goes, are closer to their traditional enemy, the Church of Rome, than they are to the advanced elements of Protestantism” (*HB* 341). Fundamentalist Protestants retained a strong emphasis on the truth of biblical revelation and doctrines like the incarnation, atoning death, bodily resurrection, and ascension of Christ. O’Connor indicated that “The [Catholic] Church . . . is no less a Gospel reader than the separated brethren” (*HB* 129). On the other hand, she sees “the traditional Protestant bodies of the South are evaporating into secularism and respectability” (*HB* 407). Many liberal Protestant denominations were no longer holding to key Biblical doctrines and were more likely to be merely cultural Christians. With these O’Connor felt no affinity. However, she identifies with Mason Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away* who though a Protestant “has to be a natural Catholic” as a prophet (*HB* 407).

For O’Connor, “the moral basis of Poetry is the accurate naming of the things of God,” which involves attempting to “render the highest possible justice to the visible universe” (*CW* 980-1). This is so important because “the visible universe is a reflection of the invisible universe” (*CW* 981). These quotes reveal important aspects of O’Connor’s sacramental perspective. The visible universe mirrors the invisible universe. They are intimately connected. If a writer would seek to reveal transcendent realities, they must begin with the material world. As she notes in *Mystery and Manners*, “The beginning of human knowledge is through the senses, and the fiction writer begins where human perception begins. He appeals through the senses, and you cannot appeal to the senses with abstractions . . . the world of the fiction writer is full of matter” (67). This linkage between invisible and visible realities leads O’Connor to inveigh against Manichaeism.

*Against Manichaeism and Body-Soul Dualism*

In a letter to Eileen Hall from 1956, O'Connor provides a succinct summary of what she perceives as a Catholic view of creation. She notes that "Catholics believe that all creation is good and that evil is the wrong use of good and that without Grace we use it wrong most of the time. It's almost impossible to write about supernatural Grace in fiction. We almost have to approach it negatively." (*CW* 988). For O'Connor, grace comes to humans through nature, which is inherently good. The problem is that operating without grace, humans generally get things wrong. Grace makes it possible to appropriate creation in its goodness. By contrast, evil is the failure to do so. From O'Connor's perspective, it is very difficult to write about this grace directly—perhaps because it requires faith to see.

Instead, she typically approaches grace negatively. Humans tend to take God's common grace for granted; the world does not function sacramentally for them. She contends that "the moral sense had been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God is dead" (*CW* 942). Nihilism's influence is pervasive. As O'Connor noted, "if you live today you breathe in nihilism. In or out of the Church, it's the gas you breathe" (*CW* 949). Because grace is easily missed with such a mindset, it is the apparent absence of grace that calls attention to it. O'Connor believed that "writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have . . . the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (*MM* 33). It is those who know what the world and humanity were intended to be like who see the disjunction most clearly. For them widespread

unbelief in light of the goodness, love, and grace of God can only be seen as grotesque and perverse—a miscarriage and monstrosity of the fullness of life God intends.

In addition to nihilism, the dualism between spirit and matter is another cultural assumption that denigrates creation. O'Connor notes that "The Manicheans separated spirit and matter. To them all material things were evil. They sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without the mediation of matter. This is also pretty much the modern spirit, and for the sensibility infected with it, fiction is hard if not impossible to write because fiction is so very much an incarnational art" (*MM* 68). The sacramental approach to life recognizes the mediating role that matter plays in reaching the divine. Its antithesis is encapsulated in the Manichaeian spirit-matter dualism. As Marion Montgomery<sup>25</sup> states in "Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Vision," "The modernist version of Manicheanism denies the spiritual dimension of creation in the interest of conquests of nature . . . O'Connor finds evidence of a similar reduction of reality in our separation of reason from imagination, judgment from vision, and (most particularly important to the sacramental question at hand) nature from grace" (119). Rather than duality, O'Connor sees complementarity in these pairs, which must be reassociated in order to recover the sacramental imagination.

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<sup>25</sup> Montgomery notes that "one of the most popular critical assumptions in our century is that the realist's art is incompatible with a spiritual vision" (119). She disagrees with this assessment and argues that O'Connor is "preeminently among modern writers, a realist" (120) and she sees in O'Connor "a rescue of the artist back to the fullness of reality" (127). According to Montgomery, O'Connor sacramentally accepted the larger world beyond what the mind can fully comprehend. Her article covers the following aspects of O'Connor's approach: a response to modern Manicheanism; Aristotelian aspects of artisanship in her aesthetic vision with reason and imagination working together in a complementary fashion; the anagogical or the relation between grace and nature at the center of her dramatic concern; an artistic piety that instead of seeking to create art for art's sake, seeks to return the gift back to God; a piety toward creation that requires careful attention toward the world; and wit complemented by humor in accepting humankind's fallen nature while affirming the possibility of a rescuing grace.

This dualism has a number of profound negative consequences both inside and outside the Church according to O'Connor. "By separating nature and grace as much as possible, [the average Catholic reader who is too Manichaeian] has reduced his conception of the supernatural to pious cliché and has become able to recognize literature in only two forms, the sentimental and the obscene" (*MM* 147). Real grace is grounded in the gritty realities of earthly existence. It is often soul-shaking and gut-wrenching. It is also often resisted. O'Connor argues that "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful . . . Human nature is so faulty that it can resist any amount of grace and most of the time it does" (*HB* 307). Therefore, grace does not breakthrough with pious platitudes.

In Chapter 2, I discussed how Gnosticism has influenced the church in our day. Although Catholicism has not escaped this influence, Protestants have suffered more from it because of a general lack of balance between the church's two primary means of grace: the preaching of the Bible and the sacraments. While O'Connor admired the "fierceness of faith" she observed among Southern Protestants, Wood notes in his article, "The Catholic Faith of Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Characters,"<sup>26</sup> that "She is especially troubled by the anti-sacramental character of their Christianity. It leaves them, she laments, with nothing to guide their faith nor to curb their heresies" (16). In Protestantism, preaching predominates over an emphasis on the sacraments. Wood associates "antisacramental gnosticism" with theologian Karl Barth's thesis that "preaching serves as the Protestant sacrament" (*Christ-Haunted* 155). Although

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<sup>26</sup> Wood indicates that the aim of his paper is "to describe what is irreducibly Catholic in O'Connor's theological vision, to show how radically it shapes her vision of the Southern regional scene, and to offer both a critique and vindication of her work" (16).

O'Connor appreciated the Protestant emphasis on Biblical teaching, she did not think that should diminish the emphasis on the importance of the sacraments.

The sacraments are not just something done inside the Church, but should become the pattern for seeing and engaging all of creation. Therefore, Wood blames Christians in the West for a general failure to embody "a radically alternative way of life that would attest to God's living sacramental presence in the world" (157). The specious substitute, according to Wood, has been a domestication of the Transcendent in a way that reduces God to a "merely comforting and consoling deity, a god who merely underwrites our own political and social prejudices, a god who confirms things as they are," which in essence represents the No-God (157). With Christians worshipping the No-God, it became all too easy, says Wood, for Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud to proclaim the death of this No-God. In contrast, O'Connor reveals a God who is very much alive, active, and far from approving of the status quo. This is certainly shocking to those who conceive of God as either non-existent or so wishy-washy that He isn't much concerned with what happens to His creation.

Wood cites Harold Bloom's contention that Christianity in America has become so thoroughly spiritualized that it has almost vaporized with Ralph Waldo Emerson serving as a sort of patron saint of the gnostic religion of self-creation (158). This faux religion, one where the autonomous self does not really need the Church, its sacraments, its doctrine, or ethical practice to encounter the transcendent might have been appealing to someone like Joyce had it not been so disembodied and dematerialized. Against this modern gnostic gospel, O'Connor raises her artistic voice like one crying in the wilderness about a world that is "profoundly incarnational, sacramental, and thus anti-

gnostic” (*Christ-Haunted* 159). Together, the incarnation and the sacraments witness against a super-spiritualized and self-sufficient religiosity that has little regard for the embodied or the Body of Christ, which is constituted by Eucharist. Gnosticized Christianity and the hyper-rationality of the Enlightenment are the strange bedfellows that spawned the children of modernity: alienation, nihilism, and destruction of the world.

The new Platonism of artificial intelligence views the body as extraneous and seeks to download the conscious into a computer so that it might live eternally in a disembodied state.<sup>27</sup> The old Platonism sought to free the soul from the prison house of the body to experience God’s presence more fully. The new Platonism of transhumanism seeks to free the soul from the body so that it might live in a cyber reality that needs not God nor the physical world nor other people for its sustenance. As the brilliant visionaries of Silicon Valley pursue their dystopic, disembodied dreams, the need for the shocking sea breezes of O’Connor’s sacramental vision have never been more needful. It is impossible to comprehend O’Connor as she intends without understanding the natural resistance of humans to grace. As she indicated “I am tired of reading reviews that call ‘A Good Man’ brutal and sarcastic. The stories are hard but they are hard because there is nothing harder or less sentimental than Christian realism” (*CW* 942). To turn it into a cliché is to cheapen its worth. Redemption is costly. By contrast, “When fiction is made according to its nature, it should reinforce our sense of the supernatural by grounding it in

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<sup>27</sup> In his article, “Your Mind Uploaded in a Computer Would Not Be You,” Wesley J. Smith indicates that transhumanists are pursuing multiple approaches to indefinite existence. However, he notes that “the most prominent transhumanist immortality proposal these days aims to upload our minds into computers, enhanced with artificial intelligence capabilities, where we can ‘live’ in the Cloud or as cyberbeings. Smith notes that some world-renowned scientists and futurists fully expect this technology to be developed by the middle half of this century. C. S. Lewis prophetically saw the dawning of this dystopian vision in his science fiction novel, *That Hideous Strength*, which was first published in 1945.



concrete, observable reality” (*MM* 148). This is the nature of literature as incarnational art. It is the process of penetrating the concrete world of materiality to find its source, the image of ultimate reality (*MM* 157).

Despite O’Connor’s strong repudiation of Manichaeism, some critics accuse her of exhibiting Manichaean dualism in her fiction. In a general sense, some might argue that the widespread use of both violence and the grotesque are a repudiation of the body while also emphasizing the power of evil. Others like her contemporary, author John Hawkes, are left wondering “whether O’Connor is of the party of God or of the devil” (Sykes 38). If there is any one work of O’Connor’s that seems to leave her most open to the charge of Manichaean dualism, it is her first novel, *Wise Blood*. In *Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetic of Revelation*, John Sykes indicates that even a critic like Frederick Asals, who seems generally positive about O’Connor’s overall vision, sees *Wise Blood* as “unwittingly Manichean, whereas the later stories achieve a unity of matter and spirit more in line with O’Connor’s public statements” (Sykes 42). After he returns from his four-year stint in the army, the protagonist of *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, rejects the Christianity of his mother and grandfather. Rather than becoming a Christian preacher like his grandfather, he becomes an evangelist for “the Church Without Christ” (59).

Haze is “converted to nothing” (12) and convinced of several things: he has no soul (12), he doesn’t believe in anything (17), there is no such thing as sin (29), Jesus doesn’t exist (29), Christ wasn’t crucified for anyone (30), no one needs Christ or His redemption (31, 36), he is clean, but wouldn’t be if Jesus existed (52), nobody with a good car needs to be justified (64), your conscience is a trick (93), the one truth is that

there is no truth (93), and the unredeemed are redeeming themselves (94). From the hood of his rat-colored car, he preaches there was no Fall, and therefore, no Redemption or Judgment (59). Haze is a sincere nihilist. Because he thinks his doppelgänger, Solace Layfield, is untrue (saying he doesn't believe in Jesus when he really does), Haze murders him by running over him with his car. As Richard Giannone indicates in *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, "Fighting God, seeing God, and being seen by God stand in significant relationship to one another in *Wise Blood*, generating the hero's acute inner conflict" (9). When a police officer pushes Haze's old car over an embankment, these tensions come to a head. Giannone notes that "These powers collide when the car that Hazel places his faith in is demolished. In the wreckage he sees the nothing that he believes in. He surrenders to the cross when the nothing becomes a felt experience of emptiness" (9). In this epiphany, Haze is converted from a nihilistic belief in nothing to belief in God.

Immediately, he buys a bucket of lime, and blinds himself with it. He continues to mortify his flesh by sleeping with barbed wire wrapped around his chest, walking with shoes filled with gravel and shards of glass, eating sparingly, and not caring about money.<sup>28</sup> His landlady, Mrs. Flood, chastises Haze for his asceticism noting, "Well, it's not normal. It's like one of them gory stories, it's something that people quit doing—like boiling in oil or being a saint or walling up cats . . . There's no reason for it. People have quit doing it"<sup>29</sup> (127). However, she seems to have some insight even in her questioning

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<sup>28</sup> Giannone speculates that O'Connor has arranged the fourteen chapters of *Wise Blood* "to suggest that the nihilist who closes himself off to God's absolute summons to come close to Him repeats in a way appropriate to his negations the fourteen stations of the cross" (11).

<sup>29</sup> Sykes notes that O'Connor received a copy of Trappist monk Thomas Merton's *The Seven Story Mountain* from her editor, Robert Giroux, well before she finished *Wise Blood*. He also indicates that O'Connor wrote her novel during a resurgence of monastic life (48).

of his methods: “Why had he destroyed his eyes and saved himself unless he had some plan, unless he saw something that he couldn’t get without being blind to everything else?” (122). Haze’s wise blood is seen in his adoption of penance and asceticism as ways to return to God. Referring to Robert Brinkmeyer, Jr.’s essay, “‘Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart!: *Wise Blood*, Wounding, and Sacramental Aesthetics,” Sykes notes that “The key ‘sacramental’ consideration introduced by Brinkmeyer is the fact that bodily mortification, of the kind practiced by Haze, accepts—indeed requires—the body as the site of intersection between God and self” (46). The body itself becomes the means of penetrating matter to reach the transcendent. Since the world does not effectively serve as sacrament for Haze due his cloudy vision, he turns inward to find the source of mystery.

As Richard Valantasis indicates in “A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism,” the goal of asceticism is “creating new persons through patterning of behavior . . . By the systematic training and retraining, the ascetic becomes a different person molded to live in a different culture, trained to relate to people in a different manner, psychologically motivated to live a different life” (548). Mrs. Flood realizes that Haze is being counter cultural. Valantasis goes on to note that “Negatively described, asceticism breaks down the dominant culture through performances that aim toward establishing a counter-cultural or alternative cultural milieu. Positively described, the ascetic . . . lives in a new culture created through the careful repatterning of basic behaviors and relations” (549). The ascetic functions within a “re-envisioned or re-created world” (550). While physically blinded, Haze receives a new inner vision by which he perceives reality in a totally different manner. He moves from thinking that he is clean to telling Mrs. Flood, “I’m not clean” (127). From believing there is no Fall and

no need for redemption, he becomes convinced of the need “To pay” (125). This aligns his inner vision with the need to enter into Christ’s suffering.

Mrs. Flood laughs at Haze “going backwards to Bethlehem” (123). Here again, she is unwittingly insightful. Haze goes back to the incarnation—Jesus taking on human flesh in order to redeem it by suffering. As his grandfather had preached in his boyhood, Haze seems to have come to believe that “Jesus had died to redeem them! Jesus was so soul-hungry that He had died, one death for all, but he would have died every soul’s death for one!” (11). Haze’s asceticism not only helps him re-envision reality, it enables him to have fellowship with Christ through his sufferings. By suffering himself in a more muted manner, Haze apprehends something of what Christ felt in His body. This can only be experienced sacramentally (i.e., in and through the body). For Haze, the Word is not enough to bring enlightenment. Rather than resorting to proclaiming the true gospel after preaching the false, he decides to embody the gospel by sharing in Christ’s suffering. Although Mrs. Flood views his actions as unnatural, Haze believes they are natural. As Sykes indicates, “What he seems to mean is that the journey to God corresponds with man’s higher nature, which does not ignore the created self but seeks to redeem it by radically reshaping it” (49). There is a difference between going against the cultural flow and going against nature as it was intended to be. The concept of penance is also important to understanding Haze’s bodily mortification.

As the *Catholic Catechism* indicates, “interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures and works of penance” (1430). Interior change is signified outwardly in the body by exterior actions. Invisible grace becomes visibly expressed in the lives of those who repent. This makes sense from a sacramental view of life. Real

repentance cannot be contained in the mind and heart; it will overflow outwardly as a sign of a changed life. As O'Connor notes in a letter to Louise Abbott, "Penance rightly considered is not acts performed in order to attract God's attention or get credit for oneself. It is something natural that follows sorrow" (*HB* 354). O'Connor notes that it is also something that one should feel called to perform. Through bodily acts involving penance and asceticism, Haze becomes a new person with a radically different vision of Christ, the world, and himself. Although Haze tersely testifies in words to Mrs. Flood and the police officers, his strongest statements are made in the flesh. He both performs what he has inwardly become, and becomes inwardly what he performs outwardly. The synergy of this body-soul synthesis is a mystery. Having argued for an interpretation of *Wise Blood* that is not Manichaeian, I would not contend that Haze's actions are normative. Elevating severe *askesis* could contribute to body-soul dualism. The Church calendar emphasizes periods of both fasting and feasting. Forgiveness generally turns sorrow into joy. Haze's inward turn to find God never moves outward again to embrace community.<sup>30</sup>

Sykes summarizes the manner in which O'Connor works against the cultural tendency toward Gnosticism. He notes that "O'Connor's notions of suffering, redemption, and evil are tied inextricably to the body through her understanding of the Christian doctrines of Incarnation, Atonement, and Creation. But even more crucially, her

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<sup>30</sup> In "Penance and Love in *Wise Blood*: Seeing Redemption?," Susan Srigley takes exception to Brian Ingraffia's and Ralph Woods's more positive interpretations of Haze's actions. As she notes, "For Brian, O'Connor would name Hazel's actions as ascetic 'because of the purity of his motives'; Wood suggests that it is not self-torture because Hazel Motes is 'sacramentally participating in the atoning death of his Savior.' For me, Motes gets neither right" (95). The crux of Srigley's argument is that "Hazel Motes certainly has no sense of other human beings as worthy of his attention, care, or love, and the increased isolation of his rebellion makes this abundantly evident . . . he also frees himself from any sense of accountability to other human beings" (98-9).

work points to the central sacramental instance of Christ's body, the Eucharist" (70). Creation, the incarnation, atonement, and the Eucharist ennoble bodies and suffering while connecting them to the mystery of the divine.

### *Seeing the World Sacramentally*

With a Manichaean mindset, the natural world is deemed unworthy of penetration (*MM* 163). On the other hand, according to O'Connor, the Christian novelist "believes that the natural world contains the supernatural" (*MM* 175). Therefore, it is suffused with meaning and significance for those with eyes to see it. Doing the greatest possible justice to the visible world was how she sought to capture the imagination of her readers and to lead them into deeper realms of reality. As Peter Hawkins<sup>31</sup> indicates, O'Connor portrays "the material world as a gateway to the spiritual realm that at once inhabits and transcends it. This is not to say that she meant the physical to be disposed of . . . but only that it be stared at in order to see within it signs of an invisible struggle with or against grace—a struggle that is the central event of her fiction" (23). The spiritual both indwells and overflows beyond the material. For O'Connor, the drama that occurs on this earthly stage where the immanent meets the transcendent is preeminently about humans grappling with grace. In *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South*,<sup>32</sup> Ralph

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<sup>31</sup> In *The Language of Grace: Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and Iris Murdoch*, Hawkins notes that "Deprived of the shared assumptions that allow direct address, O'Connor was bound by the need to find new modes of indirection, strategies of communication that might open the reader to dimensions of life become inaccessible to many and remote to most . . . she saw that she had to discover a new language of grace in order to confront the reader with the experience of God" (2). Through three modern authors, two Catholic and one secular, Hawkins seeks to show how the concept of grace could be reimagined and made relevant again.

<sup>32</sup> For the title of his book, Wood picks up on O'Connor's comment in her essay, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (*MM* 44). She seems to view this as a positive attribute of her native culture, since "Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive" (*MM* 45), opening the mind to at least the possibility that people are made in the image of God. The stated purpose of Woods's book is to "demonstrate the immense social and religious relevance of

Wood states that “O’Connor’s insistence on a radically unapologetic gospel . . . is mediated by a no less radical sacramentalism” (3). Wood goes on to note that she calls the contemporary church “to retain its radicalism by holding hard to the sacraments that evangelical Protestants are prone to neglect” (3). Sacramentalism is a fundamental means by which the poet-prophet extends her gaze beyond the surface (*MM* 45). The sacraments prepare the mind to see through the surface of things; they express deeper meaning mediated by metaphor and symbol.

Rather than shrinking the Christian artist’s creative vision as some might think, O’Connor sees the Christian author operating within an expanded universe in comparison to the materialist. The Christian writer’s main objective is to reveal mysteries incarnated in human life; therefore, “the form of his art must become embodied in the concrete and human” (*MM* 176). The central mystery of Christianity is the incarnation, God taking bodily form. Through her sacramental imagination, O’Connor sees the divine penetrating all of existence to present grace as its gift. “For O’Connor, the ordinary vulgar world is sacramental: it is the place where God is present, in circus sideshows and tattoo parlors and pigpens. This world is profane only when it is viewed as independent of its divine source, and therefore cut off from its true identity as a creation” (Hawkins 23). Where God dwells is holy. Since He is everywhere in creation, there are no unholy places. As Hawkins notes, “Her goal is not only to make it impossible to deny the sacred as present in the midst of the secular; it is to make it impossible to rest easy with any notion of

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Flannery O’Connor’s work” (2). His study focuses on how O’Connor’s work bears on the life of the contemporary church, especially the church in the South.

secularity at all”<sup>33</sup> (24). The holy may be desecrated and profaned, but that doesn’t make it secular—God refuses to be separated from His creation.

God’s grace breaks through everywhere in the most unlikely of places and people. “What is distinctive about the modern era,” Hawkins argues, “is that the conflict between nature and grace has been resolved by the elimination of the notion of grace altogether” (24). Through her stories, O’Connor demonstrates grace in action. The light of God’s grace is highlighted in her work by the chiaroscuro of characters who seem like those most unlikely to receive it whether they be crass country rednecks like O. E. Parker or highly educated intellectuals like Hulga Hopewell. In her works, those running from God seem most likely to run into Him. O’Connor allows her characters to experience the logical consequences of their philosophical and religious commitments, which shows the inconsistency and bankruptcy of their ideas. More specifically, Wood notes that O’Connor “agrees with Percy that the Enlightenment project has fallen apart, that its center has not held, in Yeat’s famous phrase, and that a monstrousness has been loosed

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that there are objections to the idea that “There is nothing so secular that is cannot be sacred” as Madeleine L’Engle puts it in *Walking on Water* (50). In “The Word and the Wheel: Navigating the Incarnation in Twentieth Century Literature,” Kathryn Stelmach Artuso notes that “Roger Lundin, Mark Husbards, and Daniel J. Treier worry that if this is indeed the case, then ‘to be sacred means nothing much in particular,’ and they take issue with the use of incarnational and sacramental modes of interpreting literature” (505). This is an important challenge to consider. Part of Artuso’s response regarding the use of incarnational language is that “Protestantism can tend to understate God’s continuing work in the world via the Holy Spirit, which indwells believers, in bodies conceived of, metaphorically, as ‘temples of the Holy Spirit’” (505). The Apostle Paul refers to Christian believers collectively as “the body of Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:27), which seems to have practical incarnational implications. The Oxford English Dictionary online defines sacred as “Connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving of veneration.” People and things are constituted as sacred by their relationship to and with God. For example, in the Eucharist ordinary bread and wine are set apart for a holy purpose. As was noted in Chapter 3, in *For the Life of the World*, Alexander Schmemmann makes an impassioned argument against the sacred/secular dichotomy. Anything in creation can be consecrated to God and rightly understood is intended to be so. With Wendell Berry and O’Connor I favor the sacred/desecrated distinction. From a teleological perspective, all things are intended to glorify God, their Maker, by being set apart to Him. The Fall radically changed this perspective, but God’s original intention will be restored in the eschaton. It is also redemptively occurring in the present as the world is approached sacramentally.



upon our moral and religious landscape” (*Christ-Haunted* 9). The Enlightenment project created a Frankenstein who runs amok threatening fact and value, meaning and morality—leaving death in his wake. While some congratulate the doctor on his creation, others are asleep and unaware of the mayhem. This is why O’Connor shouts her clarion call.

As O’Connor puts 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 by any human formula” (*MM* 153). Even though God reveals Himself to humankind in order to make Himself immanent, the finite cannot comprehend the infinite, so mystery will always remain. Humans tend to view mystery as something that gradually decreases as human knowledge expands, but O’Connor argues that mystery “grows along with knowledge” (*HB* 489). The more we comprehend of mystery, the more we realize how little we know.

The myth of body-soul dualism is dispelled most powerfully by the incarnation. As O’Connor notes, “One of the awful things about writing when you are a Christian is that for you the ultimate reality is the Incarnation, the present reality is the Incarnation, the whole reality is the Incarnation, and nobody believes in the Incarnation; that is, nobody in your audience” (*CW* 943). O’Connor was aware that most of her readers believed God is dead or did not believe in the deity of Christ. To such an audience, the incarnation, which she found the most fundamental reality, was considered nonsense. Because of its emphasis on body-affirming doctrines like incarnation and resurrection, Christianity celebrates the body. O’Connor stated that “I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the

body, glorified” (*CW* 953). She notes that the essence of the resurrection is for the flesh and spirit to be united in peace as they were in Christ. A sacramental view of life is the antithesis of Manichaeism.

O’Connor believed that “The Catholic sacramental view of life is one that sustains and supports at every turn the vision that the storyteller must have if he is going to write fiction in any depth” (*MM* 152). This sacramental standpoint can be seen in most of her stories. As Sykes indicates, “A retrospective glance through O’Connor’s fiction . . . shows that a sacramental image is presented for the silent contemplation of character and/or reader in most of the stories” (85). Because she sought to help her readers connect with mystery, it is not surprising that she relied on imagery designed to connect the physical with the spiritual. According to Sykes, her fiction “prepares the reader for the sacramental gesture that embodies divine grace” (84) and “the direction of her work as a whole is toward the ultimate image of embodied redemption” (85). A sacramental perspective allows O’Connor to see mysteries lying within the mundane and her artistry allows her to reveal transcendent realities through her stories—the role of a prophet.

### ***The Poet as Prophet***

The fiction writer should have prophetic vision in order to reveal the mysteries that are contained within the material world. For the Catholic novelist, O’Connor sees this prophetic vision as a combination of the artist’s personal creative gift and the Church’s gift that extends the artist’s sight (*MM* 179-80). Poesis and prophecy come together in the artist’s revelation of transcendent mysteries through metaphor. O’Connor argues that the

vision a fiction writer needs is multi-leveled<sup>34</sup> to increase the meaning of their story: allegorical (one fact pointing to another), tropological or moral (what should be done), and anagogical (having to do with the Divine life and our participation in it) [MM 72]. However, no matter how many levels the artist is able to envision simultaneously, mystery must remain for it can never be exhausted. As Alice Walker indicated in her essay, “Beyond the Peacock,” if O’Connor’s work can be said to be about anything “then it is ‘about’ prophets and prophecy, ‘about’ revelation, and ‘about’ the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don’t have a chance of spiritual growth without it” (53). As poet/prophet, O’Connor reveals the real sacramentally.

The prophet sees the world from God’s perspective, which is different from the normal view of humanity. As William Blake (1757-1827) summarizes the problem in verse in his poem “The Everlasting Gospel”: “This life’s five windows of the soul / Distorts the Heavens from pole to pole, / And leads you to believe a lie / When you see with, not thro’, the eye.” As a prophet, O’Connor seeks to help her readers to not just perceive the outward nature of the world with their senses, but to move from the surficial to the sacred that undergirds all reality. Because the secular view distorts the vision of reality, the prophet of fiction seeks to provide corrective lenses that initially seem to distort, like the grotesque and violent, in order to bring the truth into focus. As Karl Martin notes in his article “Flannery O’Connor’s Prophetic Imagination”: “She believed she had to make what she saw as ‘distortions’ apparent to her audience which saw them as natural” (46). Gentle and subtle persuasion is not the typical way to change someone’s

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<sup>34</sup> O’Connor notes that this approach was used by the medieval commentators in terms of scriptural exegesis, but it was also an attitude toward reading all of creation.

whole worldview. Typically, some kind of life-changing event is required. O'Connor's protagonists often experience such revelations as the grotesque, the violent, and the disruptive discomfit their self-assuredness and pride. Their tight hold on their metaphysical conceits require extraordinary means to pry loose.

What gives O'Connor this unique prophetic perspective? She had a unique ability to both understand the modern consciousness and to judge it from a pre-modern perspective. In a letter to "A.," she noted that "I am a Catholic peculiarly possessed of the modern consciousness, that thing that Jung describes as unhistorical, solitary, and guilty. To possess this *within* the Church is to bear a burden . . . It's to feel the contemporary situation at the ultimate level" (CW 942). With her poetic sensibilities, O'Connor deeply perceives the pain, alienation, and nihilism of modernity, but as one who sees this fragmentation from the historical, communal, and redemptive vision of the Catholic Church. She also comprehends the self-satisfied, prideful easy-believism that characterizes so much of Christianity in the modern period as missing the mystery of grace.

Because her imagination is rooted in a medieval Christian perspective and Old Testament sense of history, "the clean sea breeze of the centuries"<sup>35</sup> blowing through her mind gave her a different vantage point. As Martin indicates, "O'Connor's medieval

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<sup>35</sup> In his Preface to Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, C. S. Lewis notes the value of reading old books: "We may be sure that the characteristic blindness of the twentieth century—the blindness about which posterity will ask, 'But how could they have thought that?'—lies where we have never suspected it . . . None of us can fully escape this blindness, but we shall certainly increase it, and weaken our guard against it, if we read only modern books. Where they are true they will give us truths which we half knew already. Where they are false they will aggravate the error with which we are already dangerously ill. The only palliative is to keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds, and this can be done only by reading old books." In addition to reading widely, O'Connor said that she read St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica* for twenty minutes every night before going to bed (HB 93). She also drew from Augustine and the desert fathers among others sources of an older wisdom.

imagination is central to the critique of the modern world so evident in her fiction, for she must have alternative possibilities to offer her readers, alternatives their modern minds, so influenced by Enlightenment thought, have not truly considered” (53). Against the Enlightenment’s privileging of rationalistic and naturalistic secularism, she hearkens back to the pre-modern propensity to see the world sacramentally. Martin notes that she challenges the myths of the modern world (56) and “pushed very hard to hold onto the idea of the mystery of God’s supernatural activity in her rationalistic age” (47), which often involves challenging our civilization’s foundations (42) and striking at the heart of our social system (40). Although many of the great modern authors make the maladies of modernity evident, O’Connor offers a counter metanarrative that is distinctly Christian.

The Old Testament prophets did not just warn of God’s impending judgement, they offered hope for salvation, otherwise their message could only result in despair. They offered a counternarrative to the prevailing cultural assumptions that pointed people back to ultimate realities. In *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, H. Porter Abbott notes that “You could in fact argue, and people have, that our need for narrative form is so strong that we don’t really believe something is true unless we can see it as a story” (44). Because stories cannot be tested through the scientific method, they are relegated to the sphere of the subjective in the Enlightenment project. However, they are central to meaning making for humanity. Therefore, “narrative [is] at the center of cultural change . . . if language is to change us . . . it must do so by providing us with alternative narratives” (Martin 36). In this view, individual and cultural change come about as new masterplots and metaphors are adopted in place of old ones.

As a prophet, O'Connor's counternarrative is shaped by an understanding of reality based on the Old and New Testament revelation. Martin argues that "O'Connor attempts to communicate the messages of the Old Testament prophets to the modern world" through her fiction (34). What is the essence of that message? In a review of *Israel and Revelation*, O'Connor wrote that 'In the Hellenic world man was seeking God, in the Hebrew world God was seeking man' (Martin 40). This is the hope of O'Connor's prophetic message—God is seeking man. For example, Hazel Motes "saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing" (CW 11). Martin argues that O'Connor was significantly influenced by her review of Eric Voegelin's three-volume *Order and History* in which "Voegelin embraces a history in which God repeatedly intervenes on behalf of his people" (40). This is the good news. The bad news is that most people do not think they need saving (e.g., Ruby Turpin in "Revelation") or believe they can save themselves (e.g., Rayber in *The Violent Bear it Away*).

Conversely, for O'Connor, "meaning centered in the redemption of Christ, so she paid close attention to every aspect of the world which she believed in need of redemption" (Martin 45). God's redemption is fundamentally a restoration of relationship with Him, which inevitably leads to return to a renewed connection with other human beings and the world God created. Because the need for God's redemption is so rarely recognized, "the prophet must use the language of amazement" as well as that of grief for 'the real deathliness that hovers over us and gnaws within us' in the words of Walter

Brueggemann<sup>36</sup> (Martin 38). When apprehended, separation from God appears as a cause of fear for impending judgement as well as a hunger for the fulfillment that only He can provide. Separation from God is a sort of living death, an unquenchable hunger for eternal life. In this context, God's offer of salvation by grace appears utterly amazing. Even when it is rejected, the person who encounters God's offer of grace is typically never quite the same. For example, the Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" moves from finding "No pleasure but meanness" to finding no real pleasure in life (CS 132-3) when he resists grace.

But the question remains: what are the means by which an author, as prophet, can penetrate the hard shell of secularism or the cool indifference of cultural Christianity to reach mystery? In *Flannery O'Connor: The Imagination of Extremity*, Frederick Asals<sup>37</sup> indicates how O'Connor's prophetic vision leads to a sacramental imagination through a process that variously employs her own unique mix of asceticism, violence, death, the grotesque, and comedy. As noted above, the human condition is typically fraught with false notions of what constitutes ultimate reality. Because individually and culturally we tend to cling tightly to our metanarrative with its various masterplots, much stripping away is typically required. As O'Connor noted, "I am very well aware that for a majority of my readers, baptism is a meaningless rite, and so in my novel I have to see that this baptism carries enough awe and mystery to jar the reader into some kind of emotional recognition of its significance" (MM 162). Shock and awe are often required to wake up a

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<sup>36</sup> Martin's article takes the general principles of Brueggemann's *The Prophetic Imagination* and applies them to O'Connor. Most people might think of a prophet as primarily foreseeing and foretelling the future, but the prophet's role is much more far-reaching as both Brueggemann and Martin illustrate.

<sup>37</sup> Chapter 6 of Asal's book is entitled "The Prophetic Imagination" and is the specific location of his work that I am drawing from.

catatonic culture to behold mystery. O'Connor's distinctive means of creating this disquieting disclosure of the transcendent are asceticism, violence, death, the grotesque, and tragicomedy.

### Asceticism: Laying the Soul Bare

Asceticism is violence turned inward for the purposes of self-purgation. It involves a stripping away of false notions of the self, so that we see ourselves more as God sees us. Suffering and self-denial are intended to turn the soul from self to God. Asals notes that the strain of asceticism in O'Connor's works "subjects her protagonists to a purging away of the extraneous and inessential and brings them to the cross of their final commitments" (205). By bearing suffering, the soul is laid bare and bereft of its usual support systems and distractions. At first glance, asceticism might be seen as antithetical to the sacramental imagination in its seeming denial of the body and the world.

Yet, Asals sees complementarity rather than conflict because the crucifixion and the incarnation of Christ are inseparable. As he indicates, "If [asceticism] derives from the Crucifixion and suggests self-denial and detachment from the world of things, [sacramentalism] stems from the Incarnation and affirms the presence of the divine within the created world" (205). The burning of the eyes that accompanies asceticism provides the purification needed to see sacramentally. Following this purification of perception, O'Connor's protagonists "are returned to a world of matter through which spirit gleams: the ascetic action thus comes to reveal the sacramental vision . . . Out of the creative tension between the ascetic and the sacramental comes that mingled severity and radiance, the austere and the visionary, that marks the uniqueness of all of O'Connor's



later fiction” (205). In this view, asceticism is the necessary precursor of the sacramental imagination. Barrenness ultimately bears fruit. The world remains the same, but the protagonist’s perception of it is radically altered and centered on God who was previously absent from view.

### Violence: Fall and Redemption

While asceticism is a kind of violence directed inward, O’Connor’s fiction often contains external violence. Many readers and critics object to this violence, but with O’Connor it is never gratuitous. As she indicates, “With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially . . . Violence is a force that can be used for good or evil, and among other things taken by it is the kingdom of heaven” (*MM* 113). Violence is an extreme situation that O’Connor employs as a means of revelation. People may intend it for evil (e.g., to harm) or good (e.g., to protect another), but God is able to turn violence that is intended for evil by the perpetrator into good.<sup>38</sup> Violence in O’Connor’s fiction is typically accompanied by at least an offer of grace. Jesus’s suffering on the cross represents horrible violence being visited on the completely innocent, but its result is the redemption of His people.

Similarly, the aim of violence and suffering in O’Connor’s fiction is essentially redemptive. Violence in O’Connor’s oeuvre demonstrates the reality of the Fall of humankind, but it also provides the opportunity for God to transform suffering into

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<sup>38</sup> Although the crucifixion of Jesus is the supreme example, the book of Genesis in the Bible provides another classic example of this principle of God turning what is intended for evil to good purposes. Joseph’s jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, but God used that to deliver Joseph’s family from a great famine in Israel. As Joseph said to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today” (Genesis 50:20, English Standard Version).

salvation. As with asceticism, the role of violence is the annihilation of the old self-consciousness in order to make new vision possible. The aim of violence is transformation. In its conceit, the mind asserts its transcendence and elevates itself above the body, but pain brings it back to Earth. “Only pain is capable of piercing this pretension, the violent stripping away of complacency that can return man to his unaccommodated condition as the grotesque inhabitant of a world ruled by an all-demanding God” (Asals 232). Outward violence in O’Connor’s works are accompanied by an inward violence that is even more devastating, but essential to potentially opening the soul to God’s grace. It is the crux that leads to a moment of decision—either a turning to or away from God.

#### Death: Life at its Extremity

The extremity of violence is death. Nothing so concentrates the mind and places it in perspective as the nearness of death. The point just before death is the threshold between the temporal and the eternal. If asceticism and external violence represent a stripping away of self, death represents annihilation of the known self. One of O’Connor’s bloodiest stories is “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” She noted that “in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother’s soul, and not for the dead bodies” (*MM* 113). The threat of death is perhaps the only thing that could bring the self-centered and self-satisfied Grandmother to see life in a new way. It is also important to note that O’Connor avers that “Often the nature of grace can be made plain only by describing its absence” (*MM* 204). There is a sense in which God’s abundant grace is so often taken for granted that only removing it will make it conspicuous by absence.

This potential working of grace represents the usually invisible lines of spiritual motion that interests O'Connor as a writer. "Death is everywhere, either as the literal extreme of earthly life or as its metaphorical equivalent, the death of the self brought about by the transfiguration of consciousness" (Asals 232). Death is a way of shouting to the hard of hearing. It also points to the end of time and the transition to eternity. Particularly in her later works, Asals argues that "The sacramental finally manifests itself in the great duality of the eschatological: we may be looking at this world, but the pressures of heaven and hell make themselves felt behind it . . . they burst into the phenomenal world to give undeniable evidence of their reality" (206). The struggles of humans on Earth have eternal consequences with God as the ultimate protagonist and the devil as the upstart antagonist. A part of sacramental vision involves seeing earthly and heavenly struggles as intimately connected.

#### Grotesque: The Need for Grace Made Evident

Asceticism, violence, and death are not the only means that O'Connor uses to reconnect people to ultimate realities. She also makes use of the grotesque. She argues that "there will be nothing in life too grotesque, or too 'un-Catholic,' to supply the materials of [the Catholic writer's] work" (*MM* 209). Part of the artist's prophetic vision is to recognize the truly grotesque in life. The grotesque points to the reality of a disordered universe. Viewing that which is grotesque reminds us that all is not right with the world. As a Catholic, O'Connor believes that the universe is founded on certain theological truths, including the Fall, the Redemption, and the Judgement (*MM* 185). Something has gone terribly wrong and needs to be addressed by mercy or justice.

The first chapter of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) is entitled "The Book of the Grotesque." In it, the narrator describes the nature of the grotesque as follows: "All about in the world were the truths and they were all beautiful . . . It was the truths that made the people grotesques . . . It was [the old man's] notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood" (6). This distortion caused by a single-minded focus on one truth was common to all people. All the men and women the writer had known had become grotesques—some horrible, some amusing, some even beautiful (5).

In her essay, "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor describes grotesque works of fiction as those in which "the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life . . . Yet the characters have an inner coherence . . . Their fictional qualities lean away from the typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" (MM 40). Writing about the grotesque was a means to communicate the ills and mysteries of life, and especially to move through the surface of things "into an experience of mystery itself" (MM 41). O'Connor goes on to indicate what the writer of grotesque fiction is seeking: "He's looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees" (MM 42). It is this attempt to connect the visible and invisible realities that leads to obvious distortions.

Yet it is also realism in that it tries to capture the fullness of life as it really is: a convergence of the material, manners, and mystery. Because of the discrepancies that it is seeking to combine, grotesque fiction can be expected to be “wild, that it is almost of necessity going to be violent and comic” (*MM* 43). The grotesque in fiction is a sacramental way of seeing the world with its intimate linkage of the physical and the spiritual. Asals cites an unpublished manuscript where O’Connor notes, “There is always an intensity about [the grotesque] . . . that creates a general discomfort that brings with it a slight hint of death to the ego, a kind of memento mori that leaves us for an instant alone facing the ineffable” (231). The grotesque is another way that O’Connor seeks to shake her readers and awaken them from their comfortable slumbers on pillows of false assumptions that fail to take into account the effects of the Fall on themselves and the world in its full reality.

#### A Tragicomic Sensibility: Fall and Redemption

Although replete with violence and the grotesque, O’Connor’s works are nonetheless also humorous, often at the same time. Her tragicomic vision is grounded in her belief in the Fall and Redemption. Humanity represents a wonderful combination of brokenness and greatness; a profound irony. Humankind was made in the image of God, but the image has been fatally flawed by the Fall. Yet, waiting and hoping for redemption remains the hope of those like O’Connor who believe that God is present and at work now and will restore all things in accordance with His original intention. Asals points to Ruby Turpin’s vision in “Revelation” of the procession of “a vast horde of souls [that] were rumbling toward heaven” consisting of companies of white trash, Blacks, freaks, and lunatics with the respectable white people like her and her husband bringing

up the rear (CS 508) as an inherently comic spectacle. He notes that “In a final tension with the terror and awe of her extreme vision of reality, O’Connor’s comedy is both the balm which makes that vision bearable and the sense against which it jars, returning as yet again to the grotesque at the heart of her work . . . Evoking simultaneously laughter and fear” (233). O’Connor often leaves us shaken by both laughter and holy fear.

James Napier notes that “O’Connor has been labeled most often as a tragicomic artist” (22). In his article, “Flannery O’Connor’s Last Three: The Sense of an Ending,” he examines how O’Connor’s last three short stories embody different balances between tragedy and comedy. “In ‘Parker’s Back,’ with its youth and robust humor, the mode tilts to comedy and can be said to be COMIC-tragic; but in ‘Judgement Day,’ with its old age and confinement, the mode switches to TRAGIcomic. Providing extremes within the mode, these stories differ from ‘Revelation,’ which occupies the middle ground in balance of tragic and comic” (23). As Ecclesiastes 3:4 says, there is “a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.” In each of O’Connor’s fictional works, we see both comedy and tragedy blending together as indicative of the human condition in general, but with the balance shifting back and forth. Napier quotes the assessment of a good friend of O’Connor, Robert Fitzgerald, who said “On the tragic scene, each time, the presence of her humor is like the presence of grace. Has not tragicomedie as least since Dante been the most Christian of genres?” (22-3). Indeed, O’Connor’s tragicomedic fiction seems directly connected to her Christian vision of God’s grace redeeming fallen humans.

This unique combination of shock and comedy are uniquely her own, but aspects of her approach mirror the work of Russian playwright and short story writer, Anton

Chekhov (1860-1904) who like O'Connor suffered from an incurable disease and died at a relatively young age. Although Chekhov was a scientifically trained materialist who did not believe in God, his use of tragicomedy parallels that of O'Connor. In *Interpreting Chekhov*, Geoffrey Borny provides helpful insights into why this combination of tragedy and comedy can be uniquely effective. He notes that "The distancing effect of comedy allows spectators to see the situation more clearly than if they are encouraged to have a kind of uncritical empathetic response that pure tragedy tends to promote" (190). Tragedy by itself leads to empathy, but too close an association of emotions does not allow the kind of objectivity need to scrutinize that which needs correction in the characters' lives and in society. To awaken the reading public's awareness, Chekhov argued that "One must shock it, rather, and then it will think more" (190). Chekhov's method of shock was comic incongruity. For example, in his play, *Uncle Vanya*, "Chekhov was able to make his audiences see how many characters had wasted their lives" with the purpose of "rais[ing] the consciousness of the audience to a level that might make them question the ways in which they are leading their own lives" (Borny 190). In laughing at the protagonists, they might relate to them in a way that leads them to identify with them and their actions in a less defensive way.

For Chekhov, comedy serves as a form of social corrective because as he said, "Man will only become better when you make him see what he is like" (190). This seems to describe O'Connor's approach, too. Borny notes the "delicate balance between hope and despair at the heart of Chekhovian tragi-comedy" (178). Chekhov effectively holds these opposites in tension by being essentially pessimistic and using the tragic form in the short view while maintaining a relatively optimistic view using a comedic approach in

the longer term (178). In O'Connor's stories, grace is often offered after the protagonist has experienced the logical consequences of their belief systems or received their comeuppance. Being humbled by tragedy brings the hope of transformation as their eyes are burned clean like those of Francis Tarwater in *The Violent Bear it Away*. Even though Francis's acceptance of his calling to be a prophet of God will likely lead to more and perhaps greater suffering, he also receives the beatific vision of having his hunger satisfied by God in the new heavens and a new earth. Fall and redemption, rebellion and grace, provide the basis for O'Connor's tragicomic vision.

Wit especially allows a Christian artist like O'Connor to prevent despair amid brokenness because grace is able to radically change things in a moment. As Montgomery indicates, "[O'Connor] sees that man's fallen nature is not to be separated from the possibility of a rescuing grace . . . she delights in protagonists who seem most beyond the reaches of grace to the secular eye. She is equally cautious, of course, about affirming such characters *are* rescued" (128). Here, I disagree in part with Montgomery. I agree that with her assessment that characters like the Misfit, Rayber, and Hulga "may or may not be damned" even when their perspective seems to be altered in a way that makes their acceptance of grace possible and plausible. Yet, protagonists like Tarwater, Ruby Turpin, Bevel, Parker, Hazel Motes, and Asbury are clearly changed by grace despite their initial resistance to it.

In O'Connor, God's grace is not just passive and possible, it is present and presses upon souls with effect. Frequently in her stories, there is a sense that the "hound of heaven" is on her protagonist's heels, often to their chagrin, as was noted earlier in the case of Hazel Motes. According to Montgomery, "wit becomes the rescue of the poet



whose world seems to be dissolving—the world of nature after Descartes, the world of spirit in nature after Bacon” (126). Indeed, the world after Descartes and Bacon seems emptied of meaning and metaphor. The opportunity for grace to intervene makes what might be merely tragic, if hopeless, a source of humor.

### The Restoration of Sacramental Vision

The prophet seeks to restore sight to the blind who do not recognize they cannot see. In keeping with a metaphor used by the early church fathers, O’Connor seeks to help her readers to open the “eye of the soul” that “when awakened opened to a direct awareness of the divine” (Asals 213). She seeks to capture the fullness of reality in her fiction and to do it in such a way that it will reveal transcendent mysteries in tangible ways. The Enlightenment emphasis on reason downplays other forms of knowledge. As Asals notes, “the rationalistic tendency is one of abstraction from the earth, from the body, from the concrete world altogether . . . The imagination, on the other hand, feeds on the world of the senses, and her climactic visions present their knowledge as experience, supernatural awareness that comes in the images of the natural world” (214). O’Connor links reason with the imagination. In her art, grace and nature complement one another. “For O’Connor’s sacramentalism, it is the natural world that becomes the vehicle of the supernatural and her characters’ literal return to their senses becomes the means of opening their imaginations to receive it” (Asals 221). Her prophetic vision is consummated in seeing through the material to the transcendent where mystery is both disclosed and remains inexhaustible.

*The Heart of Sacramental Theology: Love*

Given the prominence of violence and the grotesque in O'Connor's poetic imagination, perhaps the concept of love is not one of the first things that comes to mind when considering the nature of O'Connor's work. However, this probably is more an indictment of our culture's low views of the meaning of love than the lack of its presence in O'Connor's work. Like grace, love is costly and supremely expresses itself as a profligate giving away of the self for the good of others. Love is superlatively seen as love when it unselfishly embraces the unlovely and in loving makes it lovely.<sup>39</sup> Its opposite is not hate, but indifference. Giannone's *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love* explores the depths of the theme of love in several of O'Connor's works. He argues that O'Connor's motive for creating is love; showing through powerful action "the overwhelming boldness of divine love invading human life" (6). O'Connor shows that God's love shines through the darkness of the contemporary world, and especially the human heart, to provide revelation. She exhibits a genuine sympathy for her characters, other than the devil. Even though we may laugh at them, it is not generally in sardonic jest, but in sympathy for their plight.

As sharers in a common humanity, we all seek meaning and happiness and love, though we may be clueless as to where they may be found. As Sarah Beckwith indicates in "The Sacramental Text Reconstructed," "The very nature of the sacrament is belied or

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<sup>39</sup> The narrator in *Les Misérables* beautifully captures this idea: "The supreme happiness of life is the conviction that we are loved; loved for ourselves—say rather, loved in spite of ourselves" (140). The narrator muses on how the Bishop of D——, Monseigneur Bienvenu, was content though blind for several years before he died because his loving sister was with him. There is perhaps an interesting juxtaposition here between O'Connor's protagonist, Hazel Motes, who after he had blinded himself near the end of the *Wise Blood* lives in the home of his landlady, Mrs. Flood.

overthrown when sacraments are viewed as things and not actions, when they are taken out of the story of an ordering of ‘God’s ontological and self-effacing love’ . . . for love is only realized by lovers in loving” (538). Love is more an action than a feeling or thought; sacraments are ritual actions that communicate God’s love by participation in the divine life. To comprehend sacraments aright, one must see them as part of a grand metanarrative, a drama that extends from the beginning of time to eternity—a story of God’s love for humans and His creation. Like so many biblical stories, O’Connor charts her protagonists’ “encounter with the mystery of their existence, the adventurer of love whom O’Connor calls God” (Giannone 6). Their wandering is a search for God whether they recognize it as such or not. Their quest can only be fulfilled in finding Him, or as O’Connor seems to emphasize, being found by Him.

In considering this topic, I will rely heavily on Susan Srigley’s *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art*. Srigley makes a bold statement: “O’Connor’s understanding of love is at the heart of her sacramental theology” (162). The sacramental is the way God communicates grace and grace is closely united with love. O’Connor’s stories show how God’s grace reaches down to fallen humans in all their brokenness in order to restore them to a relationship of love with Himself. It is a love that will hurt in order to heal like a good physician. In every way, God meets us where we are in our embodied humanity. The incarnation of Christ, the sending of the Holy Spirit, written revelation in the Bible, the gift of creation, and the love of other human beings are all ways that God reaches out in a sacrificial and generous giving of love that is supremely a giving of His tri-personal self, which is inherently relational and loving.

Srigley notes her aim in her book is to “elucidate O’Connor’s sacramental vision with reference to her theological and philosophical sources and to show how this sacramental vision is embodied within her fiction as an ethic of responsibility” (2). Again, this is not obvious, because many of O’Connor’s protagonists suffer from alienation. Their vision is often inwardly focused and when they look outward it is frequently with disdain for others. However, like grace, love is sometimes made most apparent in O’Connor’s works by its absence at the human level, which only serves to highlight God’s love and grace as they break through the darkness. According to Srigley, “O’Connor’s sacramental theology and her incarnational art are connected and . . . *both* reveal her moral vision” (10). In her view, O’Connor’s exploration of the connection between the physical and spiritual world has inherent moral meaning. More specifically, nature and grace can never be separated into separate spheres. As will be explored in more depth below, Mason Tarwarter’s resorting to physical violence against Rayber in order to keep him from taking Francis back in *The Violent Bear it Away*, needs to be seen in light of his concern for Francis’s spiritual welfare, which Mason considers even more important than his physical wellbeing.

Stories are how we make sense of the world. Abstract principles are not enough. The truth and ethics must be lived out to be truly understood. As Srigley indicates, spiritual mysteries and meaning are “not disembodied in fiction as abstracted principles or ideas but is always incarnate” (17). Commenting on this idea, O’Connor notes that “The meaning of a story has to be embodied in it, has to be made concrete in it” (*MM* 96). A story can never be reduced to a statement of ideas or principles. One must enter into the story to experience its meaning. If the story touches on mystery, as she intends,

then it will never be exhaustible or fully understood in a manner that mere words can even express. Certain Christian metanarratives undergird O'Connor's stories, especially the incarnation of Christ and the creation. These point to the "divine presence in the drama of everyday life" (Srigley 17). In a manner similar to Joyce, O'Connor sees the mundane wrapped in mystery. However, whereas Joyce's protagonist Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses* seeks an Aristotelian basis for humanism apart from the notion of God as previously discussed in Chapter 5, O'Connor's artistic and moral imagination are formed by the Christianized version of Aristotelianism found in St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) and by the more contemporary Thomist philosopher, Jacques Maritain (1882-1973).

Whereas community is always at the center of Wendell Berry's fiction, Srigley's argument that community is also at the heart of O'Connor's moral vision may seem surprising. Many of her protagonists seek self-sufficiency from God and other humans. Yet, their coming to terms with their real selves as against their self-created image of themselves, seems to often elucidate their need for community and responsibility to others. As Mary Jo Weaver notes in "Thomas Merton and Flannery O'Connor: The Urgency of Vision"<sup>40</sup>: "One needs community in order to perceive reality; the community offers one a place where vision can be tested and shaped" (35). Apart from other people,

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<sup>40</sup> Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a Trappist monk as well as an American Catholic writer and theologian. He was a contemporary of O'Connor's and she refers to him in a couple of her letters. In a letter to Robert Giroux from 1960, O'Connor noted that "if Fr. Louis [Thomas Merton] reads [my book], I'd like to know what he thinks" (*HB* 380). Weaver argues that O'Connor and Merton shared "a self-conscious, strong, clear-headed Roman Catholicism" (27). Her comparison focuses on the similarities and dissimilarities between their vision, their views on the integrity of the self, the need for community, and the violence of prophecy. Weaver argues that "a false self is the most effective defense against the grace of God" and "O'Connor's characters so effectively invest themselves in their created images that they lose their true identity" (31).

it is easy for one's vision to remain distorted, especially in terms of an understanding of the self and one's duty that lies beyond the ego.

As will be discussed below, Francis Tarwater ultimately accepts his responsibility to be the prophet the community needs. Though a loner, Asbury Fox instinctively senses a need for communion with other people as he thinks he is facing death. As Srigley notes, "the ethic of responsibility in O'Connor's fiction is based in community, and this means they the very nature of moral decision making must transcend individualistic interests" (34). For examples, she mentions Buford Munson and the woman at the filling station in *The Violent Bear it Away* who chastise Francis for his failure to fulfill basic communal duties. In his article, "From the Incarnational to the Grotesque," Benjamin Saxon indicates that "Through an epiphanic moment . . . O'Connor's . . . characters struggle to transcend their self-interest and rejoin the community from which they severed themselves" (107). Their disconnection from the community is symptomatic of their separation from God and the world.

Rather than focusing on what is right or wrong in the abstract, Srigley argues that O'Connor is "interested in the question of how human beings are spiritually and morally interconnected and thus responsible for others in view of that connection" (34). As was discussed in Chapter 3, one of the results of the sacramental imagination is a recovery of a sense of connection with other people, which always involves a responsibility to love and do good to them. Consequently, "love is what connects human beings to each other and to God" (Srigley 35). What is the ordering force of reality? For O'Connor, the answer is love, which like God is both immanent (experienced in and through human relations) and transcendent (pointing to God and ultimate realities that are not fully

comprehensible) [Srigley 36]. As Rayber demonstrates, reason alone is not a sufficient grounds for morality. Love without reason could lead to a sentimentality that does more harm than good. Reason and love together lead to right action.

Although Leopold Bloom is not a Christian, he exemplifies this principle through his Aristotelian acceptance of what the good life entails. As Srigley indicates, “Not belief, but openness to reality is paramount” to “penetrate and understand the mystery of existence” (54). At its heart, sin is a failure to love God, other people, and oneself (Srigley 42). These three are intimately tied together. In a world so often characterized by divisions, O’Connor “attempt[s] to overcome the separation between grace and nature, reason and imagination, and vision and judgment” as “part of her response to the modern lack of shared moral values” (Srigley 53-4). Her poetic vision recognizes connections throughout the cosmic order. Connections that must be restored in order to find wholeness and true happiness. Srigley sums up what O’Connor strives to show through her sacramental theology, incarnational aesthetics, and prophetic vision: “reality is morally ordered by love and that the response to love is the moral basis of all action” (54). Whether they realize it or not, O’Connor’s protagonists desire to love and be loved. For O’Connor, fulfillment of this deep-seated need begins and ends with God reaching out in love. Those truly touched by such love are changed in their ability to love God, other people, the world, and themselves.

### ***Violent Love and Costly Grace***

Having explored some of the general characteristics of O’Connor’s sacramental art, it seems appropriate to see how these principles are incarnated in some of her fictional works. To this end, I have selected one novel and two short stories where

sacramental imagery is most prominent. The sacrament of baptism is at the center of the confrontation between a radical commitment to the Christian faith and an equally radical resolve to deny God's claims in O'Connor's second novel, *The Violent Bear it Away*. In a letter to Dr. T. R. Spivey, O'Connor noted that the novel "is built around a baptism, a subject not calculated to be of interest to many. A lot of people will read it and be revolted. I trust." (HB 341). The soul of fourteen-year-old Francis Marion Tarwater hangs in the balance in a cosmic tug of war between his great uncle, Mason Tarwater, and his uncle, Rayber, who are aided by God and the devil, respectively. The combatants are deadly serious and committed to prevailing at all costs because they have built their whole lives around their acceptance or rejection of God's calling. Physical violence is symptomatic of the severe stakes and internal spiritual struggles that are even more intense.

The idea for the title came from Matthew 11:12: "And from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force." O'Connor thought that "the title is the best thing about the book" (HB 382) even though she questioned if she had made the title's significance clear in her novel. In a letter to Spivey, she indicated that "One thing I observe about the title is that the general reaction is to think that it has an Old Testament flavor . . . the fact that these are Christ's words makes no great impression. That this is the violence of love, of giving more than the law demands, of an asceticism like John the Baptist's" (HB 382). As a Protestant prophet in the mold of John the Baptist, Mason Tarwater takes sin seriously. When the multitudes came out to be baptized by John in the wilderness, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?" (Luke 3:7). Realizing



what is at stake, Mason feels a particular responsibility to his own family members and is committed to snatching them out of the path of God's judgement at all costs.

Francis, who is typically just referred to as Tarwater in the novel, was born when his mother died in a car crash. When his father commits suicide soon thereafter, the infant Tarwater becomes the charge of his uncle, Rayber, a school teacher who is an atheist and secular humanist. Concerned for the young child's spiritual welfare and responding to the voice of the Lord, old Tarwater comes to Rayber's home and baptizes the baby in its crib. Just as the final words of baptism are being uttered, Rayber walks in and discovers what the old prophet has done. Rayber decides that the best course of action is to mock what he sees as a meaningless ritual by "baptizing" the baby's bottom. Shocked by what he sees as blasphemy and concerned about the child's spiritual welfare, old Tarwater proceeds to kidnap the baby so he can raise him according to his own beliefs at his remote farm called Powderhead. God's command to baptize baby Tarwater, also came with the pronouncement that the young baby would eventually take Mason's place as a prophet. Old Tarwater leaves behind a note of prophecy for Rayber indicating that "THE PROPHET I RAISE UP OUT OF THIS BOY WILL BURN YOUR EYES CLEAN" (CW 379).

This was not the first time that old Tarwater had resorted to kidnapping a young male relative in order to baptize and spiritually rescue him. When Rayber was seven years old, the old prophet "had taken him to the backwoods and baptized him and instructed him in the facts of his Redemption"<sup>41</sup> (CW 333). Rayber joyously responded to

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<sup>41</sup> Old Tarwater does not baptize Rayber until after he has instructed him in the ways of the faith for a period of four days (CW 371). After being taught in this manner, Rayber gladly receives baptism. In Roman Catholicism and many Protestant Christian denominations, the infant children of believing parents are

what he was taught. However, soon afterwards, he was taken back to town by his father. Rayber despaired of leaving and old Tarwater said that he even tried to return “to hear more about God his Father, more about Jesus Christ Who had died to redeem him and more of the Truth I could tell him” (CW 371). Nonetheless, Rayber eventually “set himself on a different course” (CW 333). First as a teenager<sup>42</sup> and then as an adult, Rayber repudiated everything about his uncle’s religion and embraced a secular humanism that denied any need for God’s help.

Shortly after baby Francis was kidnapped, Rayber comes to Powderhead with a female social worker to get him back. Arguing that he will not allow old Tarwater to ruin another child’s life, Rayber says, “This one is going to be brought up to live in the real world. He’s going to be brought up to expect exactly what he can do for himself. He’s going to be his own savior. He’s going to be free!” (CW 375). Firing a shotgun twice, old Tarwater wounds Rayber in the leg and ear<sup>43</sup> to drive him off. The prophet’s resorting to violence seems shocking, especially in light of the prevalence of lukewarm religiosity or

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expected to receive baptism (paedo-baptism). Other Protestant denominations maintain that children and adults should only be baptized when they can express personal faith in Christ and what he has done for them (believer’s baptism). Old Tarwater seems to see baptism as being appropriate and significant in either case, but commits himself to training the child in the truth whether prior to baptism (in the case of Rayber) or post-baptism (in the case of Francis). Yet, he is also determined that Bishop, Rayber’s mentally handicapped son, should also be baptized whether he can intellectually comprehend the tenets of Christian faith or not. Rayber’s response shows that baptism does not ensure salvation, but it continues to influence his life no matter how much he wishes it did not. The sacraments point to mysteries that can never be fully comprehended; they communicate grace in ways that transcend intellectual cognition.

<sup>42</sup> Rayber is fourteen when he returns to Powderhead to tell old Tarwater that none of what he had been taught was true and to give him sass for it (CW 372). Francis is also fourteen when old Tarwater dies and he leaves Powderhead for Rayber’s home.

<sup>43</sup> An allusion to Peter using a sword to cut off the ear of Malchus, a servant of the Jewish High Priest, Caiphas, when officials came to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane prior to his crucifixion. This also results in Rayber becoming partially deaf and being dependent on a hearing aid, which seems to indicate that Rayber is also spiritually deaf to God’s words of truth and dependent on the machine-like technology of modernity to hear words while still not being able to discern true meaning in life—perhaps also an allusion to Matthew 13:13 (“Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand”).

secular views of the world. However, Tarwater sees what is at stake as the soul of a family member whose salvation or damnation lies in the balance. He will protect his grandnephew's soul with the same vigor he would protect his body from those who would seek to harm him. Old Tarwater felt a sense of failure that his teaching of Rayber had not yet resulted in his salvation<sup>44</sup> after he returned to his unbelieving parents. He is determined not to allow that to happen again and will risk prison and the insane asylum (where he spent four years of his life after his sister committed him when he would not cease seeking to evangelize her) to that end.

#### Valuing and Loving the Human for Its Own Sake

Mason also seeks to baptize Rayber's "dim-witted," young son, Bishop. Although Rayber successfully thwarts the old prophet's plans, old Tarwater made it clear to Francis that he would be responsible for baptizing Bishop, if he could not do it himself before he died. Even though his mental capacities are limited and he cannot speak, Bishop naturally shows affection to both his father and young Tarwater. However, Rayber who seeks to live by a severe rationality resists loving his son in return. Despite himself, "moments would still come when, rushing from some inexplicable part of himself, he would experience a love for the child so outrageous that he would be left shocked and depressed

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<sup>44</sup> Speaking of Rayber, old Tarwater notes that "Good blood flows in his veins . . . And good blood knows the Lord and there ain't a thing he can do about having it. There ain't a way in the world he can get rid of it" (CW 368). This highlights O'Connor's conception that some people have "wise blood." O'Connor comments on this concept in a letter to John Hawkes: "Haze [Motes, the protagonist in her novel *Wise Blood*] is saved by virtue of having wise blood; it's too wise for him ultimately to deny Christ. Wise blood has to be these people's means of grace—they have no sacraments" (HB 350). Here O'Connor highlights the benefits of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church as a means of grace to those within it while acknowledging God's ability to use other means of grace, including a kind of natural inherited proclivity to ultimately believe against one's desires to the contrary. Despite his repudiation of spiritual realities, Rayber acknowledges that he has to work at suppressing nagging thoughts and emotions that seem to point to transcendence. He thinks that old Tarwater ruined him by teaching him Christian ideas when he was susceptible as a child, noting that "Children are cursed with believing" (CW 376).

for days, and trembling for his sanity” (CW 401). Normally, he looked at Bishop “as an *x* signifying the general hideousness of fate,” but sometimes he was “overwhelmed by the horrifying love” that “was completely irrational and abnormal” because “It was love without reason . . . love that appeared to exist only for itself, imperious and all demanding, the kind that would cause him to make a fool of himself in an instant” (CW 401). Rayber’s rationality constrains him to see Bishop as something less than human because he lacks intellect and the will to freely choose.

Intellectually, Rayber’s scientific materialism is too reductive to allow him to understand and accept his feelings of love for his son. Frustrated by Tarwater’s uncomfortable reactions to Bishop’s touches and attention, Rayber tells him “Just forget Bishop exists . . . He’s just a mistake of nature. Try not even to be aware of him” (CW 403). He is so troubled by his own feelings, which he cannot fully control, that he determines to exert rationality and will over the situation by drowning Bishop during a visit to the ocean. As Bishop struggles beneath the surf to pull his head up for air, Rayber loses his nerve and relents. Rayber tells Tarwater about this episode and Tarwater concludes that Rayber does not have the guts to act on his beliefs. In his mind, Rayber is a nihilist, but does not have what it takes to move from an idea to a will to power. The old prophet stated that Rayber “could never take action. He could only get everything inside his head and grind it to nothing”<sup>45</sup> (CW 379). Old Tarwater acted on his beliefs and young Tarwater also sees himself as someone who acts in contrast to his weak-willed

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<sup>45</sup> Despite his self-congratulatory sophistication, Rayber’s hyper-rationality combined with his nihilism only lead to reducing everything to nothingness; that which is meaningless, hopeless and alienating. Although he claims that his freedom from God’s constraints make him truly free, he is impotent to act in accordance with his own logical conclusions because the results are ultimately horrifying to the non-rational part of his humanity. Rayber “kept himself upright on a very narrow line between madness and emptiness” (CW 402)—Nietzschean indeed.

uncle. The old prophet and Rayber both claim that they offer young Tarwater freedom. For Mason, freedom is “knowing the Truth, in the freedom of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*CW* 379). By contrast, for Rayber, freedom is being one’s own savior and doing things for oneself (*CW* 375). Even before leaving Powderhead, young Tarwater resented “that this freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord” (*CW* 342).

Why did old Tarwater view baptism as so important that he would risk everything to make sure his relatives received it? The Catechism of the Catholic Church indicates that:

Holy Baptism is the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit . . . and the door which gives access to the other sacraments. Through Baptism we are freed from sin and reborn as sons of God; we become members of Christ, are incorporated into the Church and made sharers in her mission:

‘Baptism is the sacrament of regeneration through water in the word.’ (1213)

Baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life and is the entry way to all of the blessings that life holds forth in Christ. It represents a radical separation from an old way of life apart from God and a consecration to new life in God. The imagery of baptism is very rich, but one aspect of it is violent: uniting the believer to Christ’s cruel death on the cross as well as His resurrection. It is a dying to self in order to be made alive to God. As Mason noted to his nephew, “You were born into bondage and baptized into freedom, into the death of the Lord, into the death of the Lord Jesus Christ” (*CW* 342). Yet, trouble is seen brewing as Francis has already begun to lose his sacramental imagination.

Failing to Connect Sacramentally with the Cosmos

Because he wants the glory of the prophet without the gore of the cross, Tarwater intentionally seeks to view the world only superficially, rejecting the possibility of connecting to God through ordinary things. Young Tarwater tried:

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—a spade, a hoe, the mule’s hind quarters before his plow, the red furrow under him—that the thing would suddenly stand before him strange and terrifying, demanding that he name it and name it justly and be judged for the name he gave it. He did all he could to avoid the threatened intimacy of creation. When the Lord’s call came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by fleshly hand or breath. He expected to see wheels of fire in the eyes of unearthly beasts. (*CW* 343)

Tarwater rejects the kind of revelations that might come through creation as too mundane and pedestrian. He wants gnostic visions that are not sullied by earthly contact. His rejection of naming things properly recalls the role God gave Adam in Genesis to name the other creatures according to their nature. Later, Tarwater’s proclivity to set forests and fields on fire demonstrates his lack of connection to the Earth.

Similar to Rayber, Tarwater views freedom in terms of independence—that is freedom from vital connections with other people and the world more generally. As Srigley notes, Francis “wants to resist an embodied spiritual existence that demands his

participation . . . For Francis, to participate in that existence is to lose control of himself by losing his freedom to the responsibility that communal life entails. To murder Bishop is to reject the spiritual and physical communion of human beings, who are responsible for all” (125). He avoided becoming intimate with creation and in so doing failed to take advantage of God’s ordinary means of grace through sacramental seeing.

After Mason dies, the stranger tells young Tarwater, “You don’t mean a thing to a soul as far as I can see” and Tarwater simply mutters back the reply “Redeemed” (*CW* 353) almost as a catechetical response to what his great-uncle taught him.<sup>46</sup> For the Christian, to be redeemed is to be purchased with the greatest conceivable price—the death of Christ, the Son of God. No one so redeemed can be considered insignificant, if God places such an incomparable value on them. Christ’s sufferings at the hands of violent men bear away the sins of His people and he sometimes uses a fire that burns to bring them into His kingdom.

### Volition and Vocation

The struggle in Tarwater’s soul revolves around whether he will submit to his call as God’s prophet by baptizing Bishop or reject the call and pursue life apart from God. Anytime he sees Bishop near a fountain or other source of water, Tarwater seems like he is about to baptize him, but Rayber swoops in just in time to ensure it does not happen. Finally, Tarwater makes up his mind to reject God’s call in the most forceful way possible, by drowning rather than baptizing Bishop. As he said to the woman at the lodge

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<sup>46</sup> Prior to and following his baptism of Rayber, old Tarwater “instructed him in the facts of his Redemption” (*CW* 333). Given young Tarwater’s response to the stranger, it seems safe to assume that he received similar instruction with an emphasis on redemption in Christ.

by the lake, “You can’t just say NO . . . You got to do NO. You got to show it. You got to show you mean it by doing it. You got to show you’re not going to do one thing by doing another. You got to make an end of it. One way or another” (CW 427-8). Because baptism is a primary means of identifying with Christ, prophets like John the Baptist and Old Tarwater facilitate oneness with Christ by baptizing people. Killing a helpless young mentally handicapped boy by drowning him seems like the quintessential way to definitively say “NO” to God’s call to be a prophet.

Conceiving of himself as Nietzschean superman, Tarwater carries out his will to power by taking Bishop on a stygian boat ride across the lake and drowning him. Yet, he cannot help but baptize him at the same time. As the child’s bellows finally ceased, Rayber “knew with an instinct as sure as the dull mechanical beat of his heart that [Tarwater] had baptized the child even as he drowned him, that he was headed for everything the old man had prepared him for” and “moved off now through the black forest toward a violent encounter with his fate” (CW 456). Still, Tarwater tries to convince himself that “a drowning was a more important act than a few words spilled in the water,” but even though he succeeded in drowning the child he realized, “He had not said NO, he had done it” (CW 465). Like Oedipus, but in reverse, he begins to fulfill his fate even as he seeks to avoid it with all his might. The waters of baptism had stuck to him like tar; they could not be easily shaken off.

Yet, he continues to try to resist the call. Following the drowning of Bishop, he hitches a ride with a stranger. Evil is patently present in *Violent*. Once the old prophet has died, young Tarwater begins to hear the voice of a stranger who questions everything his grand-uncle had told him. Eventually, as the voice become more familiar and he rejects



his calling to be a prophet, Tarwater perceives the voice of the stranger as the familiar voice of a friend. Ultimately, the “friend” is incarnated as a smooth-talking man dressed in a lavender shirt, black suit, and panama hat who gives Tarwater a ride in his car before drugging and raping him, and leaving him naked by the side of the road. Initially, Tarwater turns this degrading violence against his own body by the devil incarnate into violence against the world. He returns to Powderhead and sets the woods on fire. Yet, somehow through the violence, God breaks through to Tarwater and he ultimately accepts his call to be a prophet. As he drinks down slugs of bad tasting whiskey in the stranger’s car prior to being sodomized, Tarwater said, “It’s better than the Bread of Life!” (CW 471). This points to the other sacrament that plays an important, but lesser role in *Violent*, the Eucharist.

### Satisfying a Hungry Soul

In a letter to Spivey, O’Connor indicated that “There are two main symbols in [*The Violent Bear it Away*] – water and the bread that Christ is. The whole action of the novel is Tarwater’s selfish will against all that the little lake (the baptismal font) and the bread stand for. This book is a very minor hymn to the Eucharist” (HB 387). The Eucharistic imagery begins in Chapter I where old Tarwater talks about “spending eternity with the bread of life” (CW 334) and declaring that “Jesus is the bread of life” (CW 342). Young Tarwater “sensed that this was the heart of his great-uncle’s madness, this hunger” and he feared that the hunger might be passed down so that “he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life” (CW 343). Old Tarwater tried to encourage his young charge that “no matter how little they had now . . . their reward in the end was the Lord

Jesus Himself, the bread of life!” (CW 369). Instead of exulting in this hope like his great-uncle, Tarwater was haunted by “a hideous vision of himself sitting forever with his great-uncle on a green bank, full and sick, staring at a broken fish and a multiplied loaf” (CW 369). Far from appealing, the vision of feeding on Jesus was sickening to his stomach.

Yet, Tarwater could not escape his spiritual hunger. During his first day in the city where he had gone to live with his uncle, he became “conscious of the strangeness in his stomach, a peculiar hunger. . . Since the breakfast he had finished sitting in the presence of his uncle’s corpse, he had not been satisfied by food, and his hunger had become an insistent silent force inside him” (CW 430). As he looked at his face in the edge of a pool, he thought he observed in his reflected image a look of starvation in his eyes (CW 432). The food he tried to eat seemed to be pushed back “by the hunger it had intruded upon” (CW 437). After drowning Bishop, he hitches a ride with a truck driver and vacillates between saying he is not hungry and saying that he is. His explanation to the driver is as follows: “I ain’t hungry for the bread of life . . . I’m hungry for something to eat here and now” (CW 459). The traces of the sacramental imagination he learned from his great-uncle often leads Tarwater to conflate Jesus with eating. His “hunger and thirst combined in a pain that shot up and down him and across from shoulder to shoulder”<sup>47</sup> (CW 466).

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<sup>47</sup> The movement of the pain up and down and across his shoulders seems to be an allusion to the Christian ritual of crossing oneself where a cross is traced over one’s body while saying, “In the name of the Father [while touching the forehead], and of the Son [while touching the chest near the heart], and of the Holy Spirit [while touching the left and right shoulders sequentially]. Only the Trinitarian God can satisfy Tarwater’s hunger. As Augustine said in his *Confessions*, “because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (1). Paraphrasing Augustine, I imagine O’Connor might say, “Our hearts are hungry till they satisfy their hunger in you.”

Rayber was correct when he told Tarwater, “You can’t eat . . . because something is eating you” (*CW* 449), but he was only partially correct in surmising that the compulsion to baptize Bishop as the old prophet ordered was the reason. Finally, back at Powderhead near his Uncle’s grave where he had been properly buried by a Black neighbor named Buford,<sup>48</sup> Tarwater has a vision. Across the field where Buford had just crossed, he sees:

dim figures seated on the slope and as he gazed he saw that from a single basket the throng was being fed . . . Then he saw him. The old man was lowering himself to the ground . . . he leaned forward, his face turned toward the basket . . . the boy too leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man’s and that nothing on earth would fill him. His hunger was so great that he could have eaten all the loaves and fishes after they were multiplied.<sup>49</sup> (*CW* 477-8)

Together with his great-uncle who had passed on to the life he longed for (“MASON TARWATER, WITH GOD” as he scratched on his self-made coffin; *CW* 337), Tarwater finally acknowledges that his hunger can only be satisfied in Jesus, the Bread of Life. As

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<sup>48</sup> In “A Becoming Habit: Flannery O’Connor’s Fiction of Unknowing,” Joseph Zornado argues that “Young Tarwater must learn that baptism, graves and crosses no more contain grace than does the electronic black box Rayber straps to his side contains hearing” (54). I take exception to this interpretation. Rayber’s black box hearing aid enables hearing that would not otherwise be possible given that he is partially deaf. It is a channel of sound amplification through which hearing becomes possible. Similarly, sacraments like baptism and sacramental symbols like graves and crosses are conduits of grace to the believer. God is the source of grace, but they are the vital means through which he has chosen to dispense grace. Therefore, they are not arbitrary or mere symbols. I also take exception to Zornado’s interpretation of O’Connor’s short story, “The River,” below.

<sup>49</sup> Tarwater’s vision compares quite interestingly with the resurrection vision that Andy Catlett sees near the end of Wendell Berry’s novel *Remembering*, which will be discussed in Chapter 9. Both are communal in nature and show the connections between believers that transcend time. However, Tarwater’s vision is more distinctively sacramental in its eschatological imagery.

Srigley indicates, “The vision of the multitude is Francis’s revelation of grace. In this final eucharistic vision, Francis Tarwater’s ideas of spiritual freedom find substance and deeper meaning in the obligations of love . . . the mystical community shows him the object of his hunger and welcomes him into the reality of dependence and responsibility” (132). Rather than being a free agent, all alone and adrift in the world, Francis is offered fellowship with God and a community of other believers that transcends time. This is the food his soul craves.

### From Hopelessness to Wholeness

While baptism is the primary focus and the Eucharist is the secondary emphasis of *Violent*, the sacraments of Penance, Confirmation, and Holy Orders also come into play in Tarwater’s life as he turns back to God.<sup>50</sup> As Tarwater viewed the Powderhead property in the last chapter, his “friend” whispered “Go down and take it . . . It’s ours. We’ve won it. Ever since you first begun to dig the grave, I’ve stood by you, never left your side, and now we can take it over together, just you and me. You’re never going to be alone again” (CW 475). Tarwater shudders convulsively and “shook himself free fiercely” (CW 475) before grabbing the matches to set more trees on fire. He knows the voice and is no longer willing to succumb to its spell. The sodomy he endured scorched his eyes, which “looked as if, touched with a coal like the lips of the prophet, they would

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<sup>50</sup> The sacrament of Healing, includes the Viaticum (final administration of the Eucharist) to a Christian who is near death (also known as the sacrament of last rites) in order to help prepare them for it. Although Mason Tarwater is apparently a Protestant, he prepares for his own death by making his own coffin. It is very important to Mason that he be buried in a deep grave (where his dead body will not be molested by animals) that is marked by a cross. Failure to provide his great-uncle with a proper Christian burial is Francis’s first act of rebellion against God. Mason fears that if Francis does not bury him, that Rayber will cremate him. Rather than doing the hard work of digging his great-uncle’s grave, Francis sets the farmhouse, in which he thinks Mason’s body remains, on fire. He doesn’t realize until near the end of the story that Buford gave his great-uncle the proper Christian burial he wanted. Mason’s clear hope was in the resurrection.

never be used for ordinary sights again” (CW 473). This is a clear reference to the prophet Isaiah who cried out “Woe to me! . . . I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty” after which seraphim took a burning coal from the altar, touched his lips, and assured him that his sins have been atoned for (Isaiah 6:5-7). Tarwater has experienced a profound penance and received the Lord’s forgiveness.

Soon after, he sees in the fiery tree line “a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame” and he knew “this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in an instant speak to him” (CW 478). In response to this vision of the holy God, Tarwater throws himself to ground with his face against the dirt of his great-uncle’s grave. In his blood, he hears the silent command “GO WARN THE CHILDREN OF GOD OF THE TERRIBLE SPEED OF MERCY” (CW 478). When he finally raises himself to his feet, the burning bush has disappeared. The anointing associated with the sacrament of Confirmation signifies and seals the Spirit coming upon a believer. It denotes a more intimate communion with God and a commitment to mature Christian discipleship. The holy anointing oil used in Confirmation is called the Chrism and is applied by the priest to the forehead of the believer undergoing the sacrament. As he stands on his feet, Tarwater picks up a handful of dirt off his great-uncle’s grave and smears it on his forehead, which connotes both the chrismation associated with Confirmation and the ashes applied to the forehead on Ash Wednesday as a symbol of repentance.

Having experienced penance and confirmation, Tarwater is finally ready to accept his calling as a prophet and to bring God's message as noted above to his children. At the end of the novel, "the boy's jagged shadow slanted across the road ahead of him as if it cleared a rough path toward his goal. 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" (CW 479). It is clear that Tarwater will take up the mantle of the prophet from old Tarwater as Elisha took it from Elijah in the Old Testament. His full acceptance of his call was prefigured in the resemblance of the cleansing of his eyes in a manner very similar to the purification of Isaiah's tongue as noted above. In addition, prior to his repentance and commitment to God, there are two references to the reluctant prophet, Jonah. When he awoke in the cab of the truck, "His face twitched and grimaced. He might have been Jonah clinging wildly to the whale's tongue" (CW 462), presumably before the whale spit him out on the beach near Nineveh. He "struggled to extricate himself from a monstrous enclosing darkness" in the truck and when he was freed he "grappled with the air as if he had been flung like a fish on the shores of the dead without lungs to breathe there" (CW 462-3). O'Connor heaps up prophetic imagery as Tarwater finally moves toward acceptance of his holy calling.

The old Prophet, Mason, knows from experience that encounters with the Lord are often traumatic. When he went into the woods to wrestle with the Lord, he often returned bedraggled and hungry looking as though he had "been wrestling a wildcat" with his head still full of strange visions (CW 334). At other times, he returned without a fire in his eye and "spoke only of the sweat and stink of the cross, of being born again to

die, and of spending eternity eating the bread of life” (CW 334). Grace is a free gift, but does not come cheaply.<sup>51</sup> Whether wrestling with God like Jacob in the book of Genesis or carrying a cross, old Tarwater knows the cost of discipleship, especially for a prophet who speaks uncomfortable truths to a world that is indifferent or hostile. As O’Connor indicates, “love suggests tenderness, whereas grace can be violent or would have to be to compete with the kind of evil I can make concrete” (HB 373). Many of O’Connor’s protagonists experience grace in the only way they can, as it breaks through their defenses with shocks, violence, or visions. Even though old Tarwater is willing to resort to physical violence to protect Francis, his violence is more typically turned inward to bear the burdens of others.

***Another Baptismal Drowning—Oh My!***

Although surely shocking and sad, Tarwater’s drowning of Bishop makes perfect sense given Tarwater’s character and the trajectory of the story. However, the self-drowning of a five-year old in O’Connor’s short story, “The River,” is perhaps harder to come to grips with. Surely, one can imagine the local news station carrying the story of the tragic death of one so young with his life barely begun. Tarwater’s life may be tragic, but it seems to be redeemed at the end. Yet, while not denying that the death of young Harry is in some sense tragic, O’Connor seems to be pointing her readers to focus elsewhere—on the emptiness of his life and the hope that he found prior to his death. As Wood notes, “In ‘The River,’ O’Connor seeks to astonish her readers into the recognition that baptism is not an outworn symbol or insignificant act held over from an antique age

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<sup>51</sup> In a letter to Louise Abbot, O’Connor notes “What people don’t realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe” (HB 354).

of belief, but the very fundament of life. It enables the death and burial with Christ that forms the lifelong pattern of Christian experience” (5). For O’Connor, the sacraments are much more than symbols, they are the means by which God communicates Himself to believers. As conveyors of grace, they make people partakers of God’s real presence. That which the sacraments signify in their rich imagery they also seal in physical participation in transcendent realities.

### The Search for Significance

Harry Ashfield<sup>52</sup> is neglected by his parents. The narrator notes that he was four or five (CS 158), which gives an indication that his parents might not even be too sure. When Mrs. Connin comes to pick up Harry early in the morning to babysit him for the day, his father does not even put Harry’s coat on properly; “his right arm was hung in the sleeve but the father buttoned the coat anyway and pushed him forward toward a pale spotted hand that stuck through the half-open door” (CS 157). The stale smell of dead cigarette butts fill the air in the apartment. Harry is being picked up at 6 o’clock in the morning and his father tells Mrs. Connin that he does not expect to see the boy back until 8 or 9 p.m. Harry’s mother is not there to see him off because she is typically dealing with a hangover most mornings. As he waited to go, he “seemed mute and patient, like an

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<sup>52</sup> Harry’s last name seems reminiscent of the valley of ashes in Chapter 2 of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, which is described as “a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (27). The valley of ashes is a dumping ground between fashionable West Egg and New York City. A dilapidated billboard with the brooding and spectacled eyes of Dr. T. J. Eckleburg seem to keep watch over the surreal wasteland that reflects the spiritual condition of the main characters. The ash trays that litter the Ashfield’s apartment and the name connect the motifs. Harry seems to be dumped in this smaller scale valley of ashes. The apparent dissipation of Harry’s parents reflect a parallel decadent environment among those of more modest means than the protagonists in *Gatsby*.



old sheep waiting to be let out” (CS 158), which seems to allude to Jesus’s parables regarding lost sheep.

Harry’s father does not even bother to tell Mrs. Connin the boy’s name as if it doesn’t really matter much. Not surprisingly, Harry seems to desire a new identity. When Mrs. Connin asks his name, he seizes upon the first name of the preacher she had mentioned earlier, Reverend Bevel Summers, who she notes has healed a lot of folks. When Harry asks if the preacher will heal him, Mrs. Connin asks what he’s got, to which he replies that he’s hungry. Harry did not have breakfast before he left home. Although it isn’t clear if his father just totally neglected to provide him with breakfast or if Harry’s response “I didn’t have time to be hungry yet then” (CS 159) is the main reason he has not eaten. In either case, Harry’s statement seems to point to a spiritual hunger that he cannot readily articulate.

One gets the idea that Harry has frequently had different babysitters who can be as neglectful as his parents. “Once he had been beaten up in the park by some strange boys when his sitter forgot him” (CS 161) and Mrs. Connin’s young boys set him up for a run in with a hog that chases him into the Connin’s house. Mrs. Connin acquaints Harry/Bevel with Jesus. Prior to what Mrs. Connin taught him, Harry/Bevel had only heard Jesus’s name associated with various epithets and curses. However, Mrs. Connin introduces Jesus to him as a carpenter who made him. She also explains that a picture on the wall of a man that appears to be wearing a sheet is Jesus. With the few minutes remaining before heading down to the river, she read him “The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve” (CS 163). He is so enamored with the antique book that he steals it and hides it in the lining of his coat.

Harry/Bevel is excited to go to the river where the preacher was standing in the stream with water up to his knees. Reverend Summers shouted “Listen to what I got to say, you people! There ain’t but one river and that’s the River of Life, made out of Jesus’ Blood. That’s the river to lay your pain in, in the River of Faith, in the River of Life, in the River of Love, in the rich red river of Jesus’ Blood, you people!” (CS 165). He goes on to call it a River of Pain moving toward the Kingdom of Christ. Typically, birds in such a baptismal scene would allude to the Holy Spirit that came upon Jesus in the shape of a dove when he was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River. However, in this case the birds appears to be buzzards that presage something more ominous.

The ironically named, Mr. Paradise, begins to heckle the preacher, shouting “Pass the hat and give this kid his money. That’s what he’s here for” (CS 166). He is apparently a bitter skeptic and only comes to the riverside service to show that the purple tumor on his temple has never been healed. As he sits “like a humped stone” (CS 166) on the bumper of his gray car, his posture seems to reflect the state of his heart toward God. Paradise may be comfortable as a skeptical agnostic, but the preacher calls him to “Believe Jesus or the devil! . . . Testify to one or the other!” (CS 166). Paradise continues to look for opportunities to harangue the preacher as Mrs. Connin asks Harry/Bevel if he has ever been baptized. He only grins and she suspects that he has never been baptized so she turns him over to the preacher.

Where Bevel lived, “everything was a joke” (CS 167), but he understands that preacher is not joking. The preacher tells him, “If I Baptize you . . . you’ll be able to go to the Kingdom of Christ. You’ll be washed in the river of suffering, son, and you’ll go by the deep river of life. Do you want that?” (CS 168). Prior to being immersed in the

river, Bevel thinks to himself “I won’t go back to the apartment then, I’ll go under the river” (CS 168). Before baptizing Bevel,<sup>53</sup> the preacher tells him, “You won’t be the same again . . . You’ll count” (CS 168). After Bevel emerges from the water, the preacher confirms, “You count now . . . You didn’t even count before” (CS 168), which almost seems prophetic in its deep understanding of how Harry was viewed by his parents and others.

When Mrs. Connin returns Bevel to apartment late that evening, she finds that there is a party going on in the apartment. His mother doesn’t even bother to get up off the sofa where she is lounging to greet him. When she is told that her son was baptized, she muttered “Well the nerve!” and when she learns the preacher prayed for the healing of her affliction, she said “Healed of what for Christ’s sake?” After quickly assessing the situation, Mrs. Connin leaves in disgust without taking payment. Bevel makes his way to bed on his own, takes his shoes off, and climbs in. His mother follows him to try to find out what the preacher had said about her. The only reason she took the time to go back to his room is because of selfish curiosity. Bevel told her, “I’m not the same now . . . I count” (CS 171). She brushed her lips lightly against his forehead in what seems to be a perfunctory manner before she leaves him.

Even though Bevel did not wake early the next morning, his parents are still asleep. He anticipates they will be out cold until 1 o’clock. He rummages around the

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<sup>53</sup> Once Harry assumes the name Bevel, the narrator calls him by that name throughout the rest of the story. This seems to be a referent to the practice in the Roman Catholic Church of adopting the name of a saint during Confirmation that will then be carried throughout one’s life. Typically, the individual selects the name of a saint they admire and would like to emulate in their life, and who will become their heavenly patron. The change from Harry to Bevel represents his understanding that he has received a new identity through his baptism.

apartment for bits of food. Yet, like the Tarwaters, his hunger goes beyond the physical. Although he had some picture books and blocks, they were mostly torn up. The narrator notes that “There was very little to do at any time but eat” (CS 172). After emptying a few ashtrays on the floor, he decides to head back to the river. Arriving there, Bevel decided to “Baptize himself and to keep on going this time until he found the Kingdom of Christ in the river” (CS 173). Although he put his head under and pushed into the water, “he had to fight with something that pushed him back in the face” (CS 173). Finally, he plunged under and the “waiting current caught him like a long gentle hand and pulled him swiftly forward and down. For an instant he was overcome with surprise: then since he was moving quickly and knew that he was getting somewhere, all his fury and fear left him”<sup>54</sup> (CS 174). Mr. Paradise jumped in to try to save Harry, but it was too late.

Can Bevel’s death through self-baptism be seen as merely tragic and meaningless? Does the story primarily serve to highlight the perils of neglecting children? Are children cursed with believing as Rayber argued? Was the preacher foolish in not realizing that the child would take his metaphoric language literally? I would argue that we should expect the story to be redemptive in some way because violence is not gratuitous for O’Connor. Typically, it is accompanied by at least an offer of grace. Although young, Harry’s neglectful upbringing and baptism has made two things clear to him: he wants to count and he desires to enter the Kingdom of God with its promise of eternal life, love, and a place to permanently lay down his pain. Based on his baptism,

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<sup>54</sup> This scene recalls *Pilgrim’s Progress* where Christian and Hopeful must cross over the river of death to get to the Celestial City. However, Bevel seems to struggle less than Christian, perhaps because he has had a much shorter lifetime in which to sin and fail and has a childlike faith and trust. Christian’s and Hopeful’s story is not considered tragic because they have completed their pilgrimage through life’s joys and travails and know they await heavenly joys with God in the Celestial City.

Bevel believes that he has been changed into someone who counts. His desire for new identify led to his assumption of a name of someone who seemed to be significant—the preacher who heals. His relationship to his mother and father has not changed, but he now believes his life matters. As O'Connor indicated, "[Harry] comes to a good end. He's saved from those nutty parents, a fate worse than death. He's been baptized and so he goes to his Maker, this is a good end" (Caron 52). Had he continued to grow up in the apartment as a neglected child, one wonders if he could have retained that childlike faith or become jaded statistic instead.<sup>55</sup> Bevel had experienced the miracle of rebirth symbolized by baptism. He was now God's child, loved by Jesus. O'Connor seems to ask: "What could count more than that?"

With a new identity, Bevel seeks a better place to live. His experience of pigs in the child's story book about Jesus and his close confrontation with the hog in real life is reminiscent of the Parable of the Prodigal Son with a twist. Whereas the Prodigal went to a far country, squandered his inheritance on wild living, ultimately came to his senses in a pig sty, and humbly and repentantly returned home to his father, Bevel's home is a pig sty of sorts and he longs for the far country where His Father waits for him in the Kingdom of God. With childlike faith, Bevel believes that the Kingdom of God is all the preacher said it is and wants to get there as soon as possible. A cherished identify as the beloved of God and an eternal home where love abounds and pain is laid down are really worth seeking. He leaves the ash fields and pig sty for a better home.

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<sup>55</sup> Recall that Rayber falls away from Christian belief after he returns home to his non-believing parents.

Ultimately, the tragedy is not so much to be found in Bevel's life, but in that of his parents and Mr. Paradise. Bevel's parents have chosen a life of hedonism. Like the Prodigal Son, they squander and dissipate their lives on parties, but they do so at home where they remain far from God. Life for them is one big joke, fundamentally absurd, and so they choose to laugh and enjoy it, or at least mock it. Unlike their young son, they acknowledge no spiritual need and Jesus remains nothing more than an epithet. Their love for themselves and their pleasure fills up their lives and leave no room to really care about their child. Their lives are bankrupt and truly tragic.

Whether Mr. Paradise is a secular humanist who is generally concerned about Bevel's welfare or a demonic seducer is somewhat ambiguous.<sup>56</sup> When he sees Bevel alone he plans to give him a large candy cane. Although he can offer some sweet momentary pleasure, he can't provide what Bevel most hungers for, a relationship with God, because Paradise is a skeptic and an agnostic. He doesn't understand why he has a tumor on his head and so does not believe and mocks those who do. The ironic sign of his agnosticism is that he fishes without bait. He waits for God to make himself known, but he doesn't take advantage of the means that God offers to come to him, including sacraments like baptism. The preacher rightly argues that he should choose either belief

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<sup>56</sup> Ralph Wood sees the character of Mr. Paradise as sinister. In "The Scandalous Baptism of Harry Ashfield," he argues that "Mr. Paradise wields it as a phallic candy-stick of sexual seduction . . . In flight from this Luciferian seducer, Harry finally is able to remain beneath the water" (201-2). To Bevel, Mr. Paradise bounding after him looks something like a giant pig (CS 174). This is reminiscent of the story that Mrs. Connin read to Bevel from "The Life of Jesus Christ for Readers Under Twelve," which included a picture of "the carpenter driving a crowd of pigs out of a man" (CS 163). In the actual story, Jesus had exorcised a host of demons out of the man and they begged him to let them enter into a herd of nearby swine. When the demons entered the pigs, they immediately ran into the nearby sea and drowned themselves (Matthew 8:31-32). Bevel's association of Mr. Paradise coming after him with a large pig seems to support a demonic presence. Whether Mr. Paradise is seeking to sexually seduce Bevel (like the stranger's rape of Tarwater in *Violent*) or is showing him genuine kindness, his worldview can only do the young boy harm. Rayber also views himself as a secular humanist and thinks he is helping Tarwater by helping him free himself of any notions of God.

or disbelief rather than sitting like a rock by the river and waiting to see if Moses will strike him so that living water might come forth. Whether seeking to seduce or simply to be friendly to an obviously lonely boy, Bevel intuits that the old gentleman is a hindrance to finding what he spiritually seeks.

Mr. Paradise jumps in the water to try to rescue Bevel, but emerges empty-handed like an ancient water monster. Like the parable of the Prodigal Son, O'Connor turns the story of Jonah and the whale on its head. Unlike Jonah and Tarwater, Bevel is not reluctant to follow God's call and no whale is needed to get him to his true homeland. Jesus noted that as Jonah was in the belly of the whale for three days and nights, so the Son of Man would spend three days in the earth (Matthew 12:40)—a foretelling of his resurrection following death that is symbolized in baptism. What Ronald Grimes has to say about baptism in *Violent* applies to "River" as well: "There are enough champions of baptism's cleansing power, but most modern readers don't sense its killing power" (22). Baptism is about cleansing, but is also a movement from death to new life, which is eternal. O'Connor's story shocks us into considering this aspect of baptism's power.

#### Childlike Faith and the Gap Between Knowing and Unknowing

Perhaps it is not surprising that some critics would take O'Connor to task for what they perceive as excessive ambiguity in "River." As one example, in his paper, "A Becoming Habit: Flannery O'Connor's Fiction of Unknowing," Joseph Zornado argues that:

the story's dramatic effect depends on an obscured presentation of baptism to avoid any too-neat packaging of the child's confusion. As a result, Harry/Bevel's

struggle with the baptism ceremony does not offer ‘an apocalyptic and conclusive revelation but a disorienting experience’ . . . which challenges the assumed relationship between sign, signifier and signified, leaving only a sense of ambiguous loss, a perplexing question mark at the end of the story, a sense of mystery in place of an absent, positive ending. (40)

Zornado misses the point on several levels. His desire for a positive ending is reminiscent of O’Connor’s lamentation that many of her readers were seeking “positive moral uplift” rather than an encounter with reality that would alter their flawed perspective. While he is dissatisfied with being left with a sense of mystery at the end of the story, this is exactly where O’Connor intends her readers to be—encountering transcendent realities without thinking we can fully understand them anymore than we can fully comprehend God.

Zornado’s rationalistic approach leads him to believe that because Bevel hasn’t fully intellectually understood the theology of baptism that he hasn’t experienced something real and vital in his life. No one fully comprehends the sacrament of baptism because it reveals much while retaining mystery. I would argue that Bevel’s childlike faith makes him perhaps more likely to receive what he is offered by faith because he remains open to enchantment and receives the promises in the fullness of their reality without trying to rationalize them away. In one sense, he may understand more of the true significance of the ceremony than an adult. There seems to be little doubt that O’Connor as a Thomist thinks that Bevel has really received the baptismal rite. That does not seem ambiguous. Bevel did not struggle with the ceremony. He embraced it so much that he wanted to repeat it. He accepted that it had made him someone that counts. That is a terse, but profound understanding of the meaning of baptism.



Zornado emphasizes baptism as a sign and indicates that the preacher was referring to a metaphorical river of blood as distinguished from the actual river Bevel was baptized in. Zornado seems to be separating the sign of baptism from the spiritual realities signified as though the two were divisible. As O'Connor said to Mary McCarthy when McCarthy said the Eucharist was a pretty good symbol, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it" (*HB* 125). It seems likely that O'Connor would have felt the same way about baptism as merely a symbol disassociated from spiritual realities.

Zornado also questions Harry's assuming the name Bevel arguing that "He is neither Harry nor is his real name Bevel. In an attempt to shuck off his old identity, he steals the name Bevel, yet he truly is neither Harry nor Bevel. He rejects the first and cannot steal the second" (41). Zornado is correct that Harry has shucked off his old identity where it was taken for granted that he did not count. Apparently, Zornado is either ignorant of the fact that it was common for Catholics to assume the name of a saint at confirmation for multiple reasons as noted above or thinks the practice is illegitimate for some reason. A new identity in God often leads to a new name based on Biblical precedent: Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob becomes Israel, Saul becomes Paul, Simon becomes Peter, etc. Though a young child, Bevel yearns for a new identity that signifies he counts. He knows no other role model, so he takes the name of the Preacher who he has heard heals people. Zornado seems to allow the reasonableness of Harry shucking off his old identity given his circumstances, but apparently will not allow him the agency to choose a new name to confirm his conversion into a new creature in Christ.

Because he does not accept that Bevel really received what is signified in baptism and fully embraces it, Zornado misses the moral center of the story. Zornado is also

guilty of another of O'Connor's pet peeves; he wants to reduce the story to platitudes and maxims, to distill in his rational mind the essence of the story so that the story is no longer needed. Like most of her stories, in "River," O'Connor leaves us with much to ponder. To touch on reality is not to exhaust it. Earlier in his article, Zornado insightfully notes that "O'Connor's texts suggest, a moment of aporia opens up like a gap between vehicle and tenor, and more profoundly, between signifier and signified, destabilizing the relationship between conventional categories of knowing and unknowing" (31). The moment of aporia when the child drowns while trying to experience the fullness of what baptism signifies leads us to question our basic assumptions, rather than finding pat answers. O'Connor intentionally leaves us in the gap between knowing and unknowing, which is a pretty good summary of what she was trying to accomplish in her fiction. She seeks to lead her readers to reality, which is always wrapped in mystery. Zornado does not seem to understand that O'Connor does not leave any daylight between signifier and signified. If there is a gap, it is in his own misunderstanding of the relationship between the sign and the reality it signifies—something a child has less trouble accepting.

### *A Hermaphrodite and the Host*

While "The River" looks at baptism through the eyes of a four or five-year old boy, O'Connor's short story, "The Temple of the Holy Ghost," considers the Eucharist from the vantage point of a twelve-year-old girl. Seeing the sacraments from such youthful viewpoints, allows O'Connor to showcase their simplicity and sublimity; their accessibility to the very young and their depth for the greatest minds and souls. Because they display divine mysteries, the fullness of the sacraments can never be exhausted. It is

for this reason that they provide such powerful symbols and metaphors from a literary perspective.

The young female protagonist, in “Temple” is clearly precocious and proud as she looks with disdain and superiority on those around her. One can imagine that O’Connor might have been somewhat like this girl at the age of twelve.<sup>57</sup> The first targets of the girl’s derision are two fourteen year old girls (second cousins) from the Mount St. Scholastica convent school that are visiting with her family over the weekend. After observing Joanne and Susan for a while, the girl concludes that “they were practically morons” neither of whom “could say an intelligent thing” (CS 236). In fact, they seem like normal teenage girls who can’t wait to doff their brown convent school uniforms and don loud, colorful clothing, lipstick, and high heels with boys on their mind.

The girls laughingly called themselves Temple One and Temple Two. This was in response to their guidance from the oldest nun in the convent, Sister Perpetua, on what to do if a boy were to “behave in an ungentlemanly manner with them in the back of an automobile” (CS 238). Sister Perpetua told them they should say, “Stop sir! I am a Temple of the Holy Ghost!,” which the nun argued would put an end to it. Although the teenage girls can barely get through telling the girl’s mother the story because they are laughing so hard, the young girl doesn’t see anything funny in it. The mother also doesn’t see anything funny and affirms that they are indeed “Temples of the Holy Ghost,” which causes the teenage girls to try to politely conceal their giggles. The young protagonist, however, said to herself “I am the Temple of the Holy Ghost” and was pleased with the

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<sup>57</sup> The twelve-year-old girl in the story is never named, which seems unusual for O’Connor. This may reflect her self-identification with the girl.

phrase, which “made her feel as if somebody had given her a present” (CS 238). At this point, the idea of her body being a temple of the Holy Ghost only seems to feed into the young girl’s sense of superiority.

After dinner, the mother decided she would have to find some entertainment for the girls or they would drive her crazy. The girl suggests Wendell and Cory Wilkins and the mother agrees that having the boys over for supper and having them take the girls to the fair afterwards would be a good idea. While waiting for supper, the apparently aspiring Church of God preachers decide to sing a hymn, “The Lily of the Valley,” while accompanying themselves on a guitar and harmonica. In response, the girls decide to sing the “*Tantum Ergo*,” which is a Medieval Latin hymn written by St. Thomas Aquinas that celebrates the Eucharist. Being unaccustomed to hearing hymns in Latin, the boys say, “That must be Jew singing” (CS 241). Although the teenage girls giggled, the young girl stamps her foot and shouts at them, “You big dumb Church of God ox!” This is a clear reference to the disparaging sobriquet that St. Thomas reputedly received from his fellow classmates. The child refuses to eat with the boys who she considers “Those stupid idiots” (CS 242) and decides to eat in the kitchen instead. The cook asks her “Howcome you be so ugly sometime?” and then cautions her “God could strike you deaf dumb and blind . . . and then you wouldn’t be as smart as you is” (CS 242). Yet, it takes a somewhat more unusual messenger for the message fully to sink in.

However, the girl is not completely lacking in self-awareness. As she lays in her bed, she contemplates potential career options: doctor, engineer, saint . . . The last has appeal for her because : “that was the occupation that included everything you could know” (CS 243). But she knows she can never be a saint because she “was eaten up with

the sin of Pride, the worst one” (CS 243) and recalls how she had mocked the Baptist preacher who gave the devotional at her school. As she knelt down to pray by her bed, “she was filled with thanksgiving and almost weeping with delight” as she prayed “Lord, Lord, thank You that I’m not in the Church of God, thank you Lord, thank you!” and kept repeating the phrase in bed until she went to sleep (CS 244). This is a clear reference to the story Jesus told of the Pharisee and tax collector who went up to the temple to pray in Luke chapter 18: “The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector.’” The Pharisee is clearly proud of what he perceives as his spiritual superiority, which he feeds by comparing himself to others that he views as inferior. By contrast, “the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’” At the conclusion of the story, Jesus makes it clear that the tax collector (representing one of the most socially despised occupations) who asks for mercy receives it and is justified while the Pharisee does not because “all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

### Grace in the Grotesque

When Susan and Joanne return, they wake the girl up and she asks them what they saw at the fair. Joanne replies, “All kinds of freaks . . . I enjoyed it all but the you-know-what” (CS 244). They explained that there was a hermaphrodite in a tent that had been divided into two parts by a black curtain.<sup>58</sup> The women were on one side of the tent and

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<sup>58</sup> This might be an allusion to the veil separating the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies in the Old Testament Jewish tabernacle and temple. The Holy of Holies is where the ark of the covenant was kept, which symbolized God’s footstool and His closest presence to his chosen people on earth. Only the High

the men on the other, but each side could hear what was said. The hermaphrodite warns the audience:

I'm going to show you this and if you laugh, God may strike you the same way . . .  
 . God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain't disputing His way. I'm showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I'm making the best of it. I don't dispute it. (CS 245)

After concluding these remarks, the hermaphrodite lifts up its blue dress<sup>59</sup> and reveals that it is both man and woman. O'Connor's protagonists sometimes have moments of epiphany at the fair where the grotesque is exhibited for public consumption.

Why a hermaphrodite as the means of revelation? Sykes provides multiple insights regarding this issue. First, he sees the hermaphrodite as a type of the crucified Christ because he / she has two natures in one. Secondly, the freak willingly accepts God's will, which involves suffering. In addition to being a symbol that connects with the suffering Christ, the hermaphrodite connects with humanity, too. As Sykes indicates, "the story attempts to sanctify sexuality itself by placing it in a context where it can be offered

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Priest could enter the Holy of Holies and only once a year on the Day of Atonement, the most solemn holy day for the people of Israel. The priest entered to make atonement for the sins of the people through sacrificial blood sprinkled on the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant. The veil conceals mysteries. The holy can become apparent in the most unlikely places, especially for those with a sacramental imagination. This interpretation seems all the more plausible given the emphasis on the Holy Spirit now dwelling in God's people that is the emphasis of the story.

<sup>59</sup> The color blue is often associated with the virgin Mary, which again seems to allude to something holy happening. When the angel Gabriel announced to her that she would bear the promised Messiah as a virgin, she replied "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). Mary's submission to God's will for her is in keeping with the hermaphrodite's acceptance of God's will.

as a sacrifice to God in imitation of Christ. The hermaphrodite in an ingenious symbol because he / she can suggest both the unity of the human race and the unity of human nature with the divine by way of sacrifice” (75). As the twelve-year old girl sees her second cousins primp and preen themselves to be as attractive as possible to boys, she might initially have been tempted to demean the physicality of bodies in favor of the spiritual. However, Christ offered his body as a sacrifice and the hermaphrodite seems to also offer himself / herself as a living sacrifice. In the host, Christ continues to offer his body in a way that sanctifies freaks—those who recognize their grotesque nature apart from him. On the cross, Christ becomes grotesque in order to take a vast humanity of women and men to himself as his bride. They are not intrinsically beautiful, but become so through his love and grace. As Sykes notes, the story is “decidedly anti-Manichean” (76). Seeing bodies as temples of the Holy Ghost repudiates Manichaeism.

Her head filled with these strange thoughts, the girl while half asleep seems to see a vision where the hermaphrodite is leading a worship service. The hermaphrodite’s words spoken at the fair become verses of a hymn that are punctuated by the crowd shouting “Amen. Amen.” between each stanza. But the hymn includes the injunction to “Raise yourself up. A temple of the Holy Ghost. You! You are God’s temple, didn’t you know? Don’t you know? God’s Spirit has a dwelling in you, don’t you know? . . . If anybody desecrates the temple of God, God will bring him to ruin and if you laugh, He may strike you thisaway. A temple of God is a holy thing” (CS 246). The participants slapped their hands together with a regular beat between the amens. The service the girl sees is probably far more like the Church of God services that she had previously disdained than the more solemn Catholic liturgy that she was accustomed to. God’s

injunction to Peter in a vision regarding Gentile Christian converts in Acts 10:15 comes to mind: “The voice spoke to him a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.’”<sup>60</sup> However, the young girl has more epiphanies awaiting her.

### Embraced by Sacramental Love

She accompanied her mother when they drove Joanne and Susan back to the convent school. When they arrived, they were informed that benediction was just beginning, so they quickly entered the chapel where the smell of incense filled the air. The priest was kneeling before the monstrance<sup>61</sup> at the altar bowed low with a small boy standing behind him swinging the censer. As she knelt between her mother and the nun, the young girl continued to have ugly thoughts until they were well into the “*Tantum Ergo*” and she “began to realize that she was in the presence of God” (CS 247). This realization leads to repentance as she silently prays: “Hep me not to be so mean, she began mechanically. Hep me not to give her so much sass. Hep me not to talk like I do” (CS 247). She then begins to get quiet and empty until “the priest raised the monstrance with the Host shining ivory-colored in the center of it, she was thinking of the tent at the fair that had the freak in it. The freak was saying, ‘I don’t dispute hit. This is the way He wanted me to be’” (CS 248). The girl’s sacramental imagination is at work as she links what appear to be such dissimilar events—the Eucharist and the testimony of a hermaphrodite at a freak show at the fair. She realizes that, like the hermaphrodite, God

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<sup>60</sup> In Galatians 3:26-28, the Apostle Paul states: “You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The hermaphrodite represents this understanding that all are one in the body of Christ. In one sense, all people have become grotesque through the Fall. Yet, they are received regardless of outward appearance and circumstances into the one body.

<sup>61</sup> An open consecrated vessel in which the consecrated Host is displayed for veneration.



had made her who she is—imperfect though she may be—and He values her so much that He gave His only Son to die on her behalf and to give her Himself as spiritual food. The grotesque, Christ’s crucifixion and the hermaphrodite’s testimony, have become means of grace that lead her to deeper communion with God who dwells in her by His Spirit.

Prior to the mass, the young girl had refused the nun’s desire to give her a hug and only offered her hand for a perfunctory shake. However, “As they were leaving the convent door, the big nun swooped down on her mischievously and nearly smothered her in the black habit, mashing the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt and then holding her off and looking at her with little periwinkle eyes” (CS 248). The girl had just received the sacred mystery of God’s love for her in the Eucharist, but the nun knows that it is all important that Jesus’s love is incarnated again and again, supremely in the Eucharist, but also in the lives of His people who are Temples of the Holy Ghost. The nun’s embrace is so all encompassing that the girl almost feels smothered by it. As her face is smashed into the crucifix, she comes face to face again with God’s sacrificial love made physically present in its symbol, the crucifix, but also in a warm, powerful, and loving caress. However, it is not enough for the nun to embrace the girl, she looks at her with eyes of love, receiving her body and soul as someone lovely—someone who is a Temple of the Holy Spirit—and therefore of unimaginable beauty no matter how awkward and prone to pride.

### Connecting to the Cosmos

On the trip back home, the driver, Alonzo, tells the girl and her mother that the fair will be shut down early because “Some of the preachers from town gone and

inspected it and got the police to shut it on down” (CS 248). As the girl looked out the car window she saw “The sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees” (CS 248). Fired by the benediction service, the girl’s sacramental imagination now sees the Eucharist in a beautiful sunset. God has revealed Himself to her through a freak, a nun, the Eucharist, and now creation. Through these means of grace, she connects to God, to other people, to the cosmos, and to herself. One can almost hear the hermaphrodite and the worshippers saying “Amen. Amen.” As Sykes notes, “Temple” “points us to the Eucharistic center of O’Connor’s theological world” (77).

### *An Icy Bird Descends on Icarus*

Having explored sacramental imagery in the works of both Joyce and O’Connor, the question might be asked if their projects are related in any way. In *Catholic Nostalgia in Joyce and Company*, Mary Lowe-Evans answers the question in the affirmative. She notes that “there is no question that Catholic texts and rituals influenced Joyce. All his works engage in dialog with the Catholic mores of his early years . . . Likewise, the influence of Joyce’s responses to Catholicism on Thomas Merton and Flannery O’Connor is undeniable” (5). However, the question remains: in what way did Joyce influence O’Connor. Lowe-Evans argues that “Flannery O’Connor sought in her fiction to resuscitate Joyce’s faith” (12). She goes on to explain the situation as follows: “Unlike Merton who accepted Joyce’s apostasy even while absorbing his Catholic mores, O’Connor could or would not believe in Joyce’s unbelief” (133). To me this last statement seems like an overreach, but I agree that O’Connor seems to have taken up the challenge of responding to Joyce’s apostasy.

In a letter to “A.,” she refers to a visit she received from a one of the Irish delegates to the United Nations. Over dinner, O’Connor asked the lawyer and poet if they had any angry young men in Ireland to correspond with those in England. She summarizes the response and their dialogue as follows: “Anti-clerical? I asked her. Yes and anti-religious too. Most of them go the way of Joyce, she said, but it is very painful to them because when they cut themselves off from the religion they cut themselves off from what they have grown up with—as the religion is so bound in with the rest of life” (*HB* 262). In another letter to Father J. H. McCown, O’Connor laments that:

The Catholic fiction writer has very little high-powered ‘Catholic’ fiction to influence him except that written by these three [i.e., Léon Bloy, Georges Bernanos, and François Mauriac], and [Graham] Greene. But at some point reading them reaches the place of diminishing returns and you get more benefit reading someone like Hemmingway, where there is apparently a hunger for a Catholic completeness in life, or Joyce who can’t get rid of it no matter what he does. It may be a matter of recognizing the Holy Ghost in fiction by the way He chooses to conceal himself. (*HB* 130)

In this quote, rather than identifying Joyce with distinctly Catholic authors, she instead links him with Hemmingway and suggests that he cannot get rid of his Catholic influence and hunger for the completeness that a Catholic worldview provides no matter how hard he tries.

Other letters reveal that O’Connor was first exposed to the works of Joyce when she went to Graduate School at the University of Iowa (*HB* 98) and on multiple occasions she recommends Joyce’s collection of short stories, *Dubliners*, and especially his short

story, “The Dead,” telling “A.” that she should “study those stories, as you can learn an awful lot from them” (*HB* 203). Given her hearty recommendation, it seems safe to assume that O’Connor studied and appreciated Joyce’s work and clearly viewed his short stories as models. However, Lowe-Evans agrees with Carol Shloss’s contention that ‘O’Connor did not use Joyce or [Virginia] Woolf as her models’ (134). Instead, she believes that “O’Connor intended . . . to transcend the humanism and secularism of modernist writers such as these with her own brand of spirituality” (134). However, as Lowe-Evans indicates, O’Connor had a “penchant for attempting to slay the dragon of secularity” (154), so it is not surprising that she would seek to address Joyce’s secularity as a lapsed Catholic in some way.

She sees three of O’Connor’s stories as responding to Joyce, including: “A Temple of the Holy Ghost” (responding to Joyce’s short story “Araby” and the “Nausicaa” chapter of his novel *Ulysses*)<sup>62</sup> and “The Enduring Chill” (responding to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). Lowe-Evan argues that “O’Connor set out to convert Joyce and his characters by revising them in ‘Temple’ and ‘Enduring’” (135). Sacramental imagery plays a prominent role in both these short stories. The most direct response to Joyce seems to occur in “The Enduring Chill” where Joyce is referred to several times by name. In addition, the protagonist in “Chill,” Asbury Fox, is an aspiring, but struggling author very much in the mold of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce’s *Portrait* and

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<sup>62</sup> Lowe-Evans makes a rather compelling case that is of great interest and worthy of an in-depth exploration of the comparative use of sacramental imagery in these works. Sykes indicates that in “Araby,” “Eucharistic imagery is used to highlight the way the boy has employed religious symbolism to sublimate sexual desire” (72). He argues that in “Temple,” O’Connor’s approach is the reverse of Joyce as “O’Connor follows a young protagonist for whom the mystery of sex is ultimately explained in terms of the Eucharist” (72). However, I will focus only on “Enduring Chill,” which seems like a more direct response to Joyce.

*Ulysses*, a character that seems to mirror many facets of Joyce's own life. In essence, O'Connor draws a preeminent Joycean character into her story in order that he might experience a wholly and holy different kind of epiphany.

As the story begins, Asbury is reluctantly returning to his hometown of Timberboro, a small rural town surrounded by black woods, that he views as "a collapsing country junction" (CS 358). He had gone to New York to become a writer, but had produced nothing he deems of worth except a long letter that he hopes will give his mother an enduring chill when she reads it upon his death. He is twenty-five<sup>63</sup> when he arrives at the train station (CS 357). The reason for Asbury's return home is an illness that he is convinced will soon end his life. Similarly, Stephen left his hometown of Dublin for the Continent to pursue his writing career, but returns home after a relatively short time to see his mother before she dies.

The connection between Asbury and Stephen is made most explicit when Asbury recalls portions of his letter to his mother as follows: "I came here to escape the slave's atmosphere of home . . . to find freedom, to liberate my imagination, to take it like a hawk from its cage and set it 'whirling off into the widening gyre' (Yeats) and what did I find? I was incapable of flight. It was some bird you had domesticated, sitting huffy in its pen, refusing to come out!" (CS 364). In *Portrait*, Stephen sees himself as "a hawklike man flying sunward above the sea . . . a symbol of the artist forging anew in his workshop out of the sluggish matter of the earth a new soaring impalpable imperishable

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Dedalus is twenty-two in *Ulysses* (419).

being” (169) and feels in his throat a desire to cry aloud like a hawk or eagle. He sees his soul soaring like his namesake, the great artificer.

Despite his visions of ecstatic flight, Stephen also reluctantly returns home as an aspiring artist without much inspiration in *Ulysses*. He is more like Icarus than the great artificer father, Daedalus. Like Telemachus in *The Odyssey*, Stephen seeks a father figure. In O’Connor’s narrative, Asbury’s father is dead and perhaps this is O’Connor’s way of highlighting his need for a Father figure. However, his last name may be an allusion to Odysseus who among other qualities was renowned for being foxlike (i.e., peer of Zeus in stratagems, resourceful, master of guile, versatile wits, shrewd, with a bag of tricks, and crafty) [*Iliad* 227, 240, 258, 260, 456, 552 and *Odyssey* 132]. In “Flannery O’Connor’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Failure,” David Aiken<sup>64</sup> notes that Stephen links himself with the fox in the Circe episode in *Ulysses*. The name Asbury may point to Francis Asbury (1745-1816), one of the first bishops of the Methodist Episcopal Church in America, who spread Methodism there during the Second Great Awakening. Like Stephen, Asbury fails to live up to the promise implied in his name.

O’Connor also had to leave her aspiring literary career in the north (Connecticut) to come home because of a debilitating disease. Perhaps she sees Asbury as the kind of person she might have been, if she had not grown up in the Catholic Church. Asbury reflects that he “had failed his god, Art, but he had been a faithful servant and Art was

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<sup>64</sup> Aiken’s article provides a detailed analysis of the correspondences between Asbury and Stephen. He notes that “O’Connor frequently uses satire as an instrument of moral judgement, but ‘The Enduring Chill’ is unique among her stories because its satiric object is a specific literary character” (245). Aiken argues that O’Connor fails to “recognize the similarity of her criticism of Stephen with Joyce’s own criticism of his young hero” (258). He goes on to indicate that Joyce shows Stephen’s personal failure by contrasting his character with that of Leopold Bloom who “is one of those truly good men who O’Connor had such a hard time finding” (258).

sending him Death” (CS 373). Stephen’s ultimate commitments are also to art. The irony is that Asbury’s god can only offer him death in contrast to God’s Spirit that gives new life.

As Asbury’s health continues to get worse and he grimly awaits death, his mother realizes that he needs an intellectual to talk with and suggests she might invite Dr. Bush, a retired Methodist minister over. Initially, Asbury responds “If you think I need spiritual aid to die . . . you’re quite mistaken. And certainly not from that ass Bush. My God!” (CS 371). When his mother asks him who he would want to come, he replies “I want a priest . . . Preferably a Jesuit” (CS 371). Back in New York, Asbury had met a Jesuit<sup>65</sup> priest named Ignatius Vogle<sup>66</sup> after they both attended a lecture on Vedanta (a Hindu philosophy). During discussions after the lecture, Asbury’s friend Goetz provides the following quote: “Salvation . . . is the destruction of a simple prejudice and no one is saved” (CS 360). When Asbury asks Vogle what he thinks about that, he replies ““There is . . . a real probability of the New Man assisted, of course,’ he added brittlely, ‘by the Third person of the Trinity’”<sup>67</sup> (CS 360). Vogle gave Asbury his card with his address when he left. Later, Asbury thought “he should have used it for the priest appealed to him as a man of the world, someone who would have understood the unique tragedy of his death, a death whose meaning had been far beyond the twittering group around them”

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<sup>65</sup> Joyce received most of his education from Jesuits.

<sup>66</sup> Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) was the founder of the Jesuits. Vogle is very close to the German word for bird (vogel) and may allude to the imagery of the Holy Spirit as a bird coming down from heaven that will appear later in the story.

<sup>67</sup> The Third Person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit. This is again a foreshadowing of the epiphany awaiting Asbury.

(CS 360). During the lecture, he thought he saw in Vogle's expression of "strictly reserved interest" a "taciturn superior" one to match his own feelings (CS 360).

Following much nagging on Asbury's part, his mother finally gives in and calls for a priest to come to their home. Rather than the erudite, man-of-the-world he saw in Vogle, a slovenly, one-eyed, hard-of-hearing priest comes to call and introduces himself as "Father Finn from Purgatory"<sup>68</sup> (CS 375). Asbury greets him politely: "It's so nice to have you come . . . This place is incredibly dreary. There's no one here an intelligent person can talk to. I wonder what you think of Joyce, Father?" (CS 375). Asbury assumes that any priest will be well acquainted with Joyce, but Finn replies "Joyce? Joyce who?" (CS 375). At first, Asbury thinks the priest just didn't hear him, but after he said Joyce's name again louder, the "priest brushed his huge hand in the air as if he were bothered by gnats" and said "I haven't met him . . . Now. Do you say your morning and evening prayers?" (CS 375). The priest's one piercing good eye reflects his single-minded focus on the need to save a sinner near death. At such a time he considers chatting about anything other than the welfare of Asbury's soul a distraction. So much for the artist as priest transmuting the bread of daily experience into everliving life.

As Finn emphasizes the necessity of regular prayer for being good and loving Jesus, Asbury interjects, "The myth of the dying god has always fascinated me"<sup>69</sup> (CS

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<sup>68</sup> Lowe-Evans sees Father Finn as comparable to Father Flynn in Joyce's short story, "The Sisters" (147). Father Flynn had catechized the narrator of that story and "taught [him] a great deal" showing him "how complex and mysterious were certain institutions of the church" (6). However, the narrator also indicates that when he learned of the priest's death he "felt even annoyed at discovering in [himself] a sensation of freedom as if [he] had been freed from something by his death" (6). The death of his spiritual mentor provides a sense of freedom. Lowe-Evans suggests that in the person of Father Finn, "O'Connor resurrects Joyce's own creature, the moribund Father Flynn" (148). Father Finn's self-styled sobriquet "from Purgatory" makes the allusion all the more humorous.

<sup>69</sup> Asbury's diversionary tactic here is reminiscent of the Samaritan woman at the well's attempts to move the conversation with Jesus toward abstract theological principles when Jesus is seeking to reveal himself



375). The priest seems to ignore the remark and continues to emphasize the importance of praying to the Holy Ghost for purity in mind, heart, and body.<sup>70</sup> When the priest tells Asbury he should pray for his family, he replies, “The artist prays by creating” (CS 376)—which sounds like it could almost be a quote from Stephen who views himself as “a priest of eternal imagination” (*Portrait* 221). . Father Finn ejaculates “Not enough!” and explains that a failure to pray is to reject one’s immortal soul. Next, the priest moves on to ask Asbury if he knows the catechism.<sup>71</sup> Even after Asbury mutters, “Certainly not,” Father Finn begins to ask him one of the first questions, “Who made you?” (CS 376). When Asbury responds indicating that different people believe different things about that, Father Finn rebuffs him with the curt reply, “God made you” (CS 376). When Asbury tries to go on the attack by saying “God is an idea created by man” revealing the secular ideas he has imbibed, Father Finn again gives the answer from the catechism: “God is a spirit infinitely perfect” (CS 376). The priest warns that “God does not send the Holy Ghost to those who don’t ask him. Ask Him to send the Holy Ghost.” Asbury replies “the Holy Ghost is the last thing I’m looking for!” Father Finn warns Asbury about eternal damnation and being deprived of God for all eternity—the pain of loss.<sup>72</sup>

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to her as the only one who can satisfy her thirsty soul and to deal with her on a personal level concerning the trajectory of her life away from God (John chapter 4).

<sup>70</sup> Asbury appears to be gnostic in his approach to life with his seemingly exclusive focus on the mind. While his mother encourages him to work with the cows and to sit on the porch and enjoy the view, Asbury resists her encouragement to engage with the physical world as good therapy. “On the point of death, he found himself existing in a state of illumination that was totally out of keeping with this kind of talk he had to listen to from his mother” about the intimate functions of cows (CS 367).

<sup>71</sup> The “Ithaca” chapter of *Ulysses* involves a far-reaching cross-catechesis between the protagonists, Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus that allows them to get to know one another and their differing views about life. The scientist/humanist and artist, respectively, enter into a Hegelian dialectic seeking a new synthesis for modern man. One can imagine Father Finn’s curt reply to their philosophical and artistic speculations with no reference to God as “Not enough!”

<sup>72</sup> Lowe-Evans notes that Father Finn’s fire-breathing words are “reminiscent of the hellfire sermons Stephen heard and his horrified response to them in *Portrait*” (149).

Next, the priest points Asbury to the catechism question that poses the ultimate question about meaning: “Why did God make you?” Asbury replies “God didn’t . . .,” but Father Finn gives the response from the catechism again: “God made you to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him in this world and to be happy with Him in the next!” He warns Asbury that the Holy Ghost will not come until he acknowledges that he is a “lazy ignorant conceited youth” (CS 377). The sound of Finn’s fist banging on the bedside table and his roaring voice lead Asbury’s mother to break up the harangue. On the way out, Father Finn remarks to her that “He’s a good lad at heart but very ignorant” (CS 377). It is hard to imagine any words that Asbury would have found more demeaning based on his pride in his intellectual abilities, but the priest is clearly referring to Asbury’s lack of spiritual acuity.

After Father Finn departed, Asbury “was tormented . . . thinking of his useless life. He felt as if he were a shell that had to be filled with something but he did not know what . . . There was something he was searching for, something that he felt he must have, some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died” (CS 377-8). Apparently, Asbury’s smug superiority has been shaken by the priest’s ardent appeal. Like Tarwater, he feels an internal hunger. Like Parker, he is restless and searching. Like Stephen, he seeks an epiphany of artistic self-recreation.

He takes pride in how “He had always relied on himself and had never been a sniveler after the ineffable” (CS 378). The Oxford English Dictionary on-line defines ineffable as “Too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words” with the root from the Latin *effari*, which means utter. When Asbury first arrives back home, his sister, Mary George, greets him with the following laconic expression: “Oh it’s you . . . Well

well, we have the artist with us again. How utterly utterly” (CS 362). As a would-be writer, Asbury’s efforts are doomed to frustration because he eschews the ineffable—that which words cannot fully capture, that which is mysterious. Stephen’s rejection of the ineffable leaves him bound by words that signify nothing beyond themselves. He blames his mother for caging his imaginative spirit, but his worldview limits his writing; he lacks a sacramental imagination. His Gnosticism leaves him mentally separated from the material world, which could be his connection to mystery. Asbury has no interest in the cows on his mother’s dairy farm. He sees them as beneath his interest when they are laden with metaphorical possibility.<sup>73</sup> Utterly, utter, and udder seem like a clever play on words by O’Connor.

Like Stephen, Asbury looks on an early childhood event as revealing the early formation of his character. In considering how he rejects the ineffable, he recalls that when he was five and Mary George was thirteen, she had lured him into the tent of a revival service with the promise of an unnamed present and “dragged him backwards up to the front” where she told the man waiting at the front, “I’m already saved but you can save him. He’s a real stinker and too big for his britches” (CS 378). Asbury broke her

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<sup>73</sup> Mrs. Fox’s dairy farm links the story back to *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*. Against Ulysses’s orders, his men steal the sacred cattle of Helios, the sun god, and sacrifice them. All Ulysses’s men are killed when Zeus strikes their sailing ship with a lightning bolt in judgement upon their impiety. In the “Oxen of the Sun” chapter in *Ulysses*, Buck Mulligan and the other medical students are having a boisterous party in a room adjoining the maternity ward. They are clearly profaners who see nothing sacred in the mystery of life coming into being right next door. They think the ability to describe something scientifically is to exhaust its significance. For them sex is stripped of mystery and merely an avenue for their selfish indulgence. Asbury tries to get the Black farm hands to drink the raw milk from the dairy even though he knows that his mother has forbidden it. The farm hands reply, “She don’t ‘low that . . . That *the* thing she don’t ‘low.” Asbury sees drinking the forbidden milk as symbolic: “We’ve got to think free if we want to live free!” (CS 369). Instead, drinking the unpasteurized milk results in his contracting the undulant fever that has caused his severe illness. His self-contrived sacrament of freedom leads to bondage. The irony is that Asbury despises milk and the cows it comes from. He drinks it only because it is forbidden. He spurns sacrament for sacrilege. For Adam and Eve, the forbidden fruit that led to their Fall was at least tasty and beautiful.

grip and ran away. When he later asks his sister for his present, she replies, “You would have got Salvation if you had waited for it but since you acted the way you did, you get nothing!” (CS 378). As he desperately searches for a last meaningful experience before his death, he recalls the moment of communion he felt with the Black farm hands when he smoked with them in the dairy. Asbury’s yearning for communion with others is also significant. Though he sees himself as independent, he doesn’t want to die alone.

O’Connor notes that “Alienation was once a diagnosis, but in much of the fiction of our time it has become an ideal. The modern hero is the outsider. His experience is rootless. He can go anywhere. He belongs nowhere. Being alien to nothing, he ends up being alienated from any kind of community based on common tastes and interests”<sup>74</sup> (MM 199-200). The modern ideal of the everyman from anywhere is in reality the soul adrift.

After asking his mother to call them to him so he can say his last goodbye, “He waited, preparing himself for the encounter as a religious man might prepare himself for the last sacrament” (CS 379). Although he doesn’t believe in God, Asbury yearns for the kind of final solace that something like the sacrament of last rites would provide.

However, he is once again disappointed as the farm hands take the proffered cigarettes with gratitude and pocket them without smoking with him. He is further chagrined by their insistence on how well he looks. At this point, Asbury gives up hope that “there would be a significant experience before he died” (CS 380). When Dr. Block arrives, Asbury awakens with “a sudden terrible foreboding that the fate awaiting him was going to be more shattering than any he could have reckoned on” (CS 381). Through his

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<sup>74</sup> O’Connor’s thoughts here regarding the contrast between the alienation of modernity with the rootlessness associated with it and lack of community seems very much in keeping with Wendell Berry’s ideas.

mother, he soon learns that Dr. Block's diagnosis is that he has undulant fever, a non-life-threatening illness. Thinking he was about to drop off to sleep, they leave him in his room alone.

When he glanced at the mirror across the room, he “looked shocked clean<sup>75</sup> as if they had been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him. His sacramental imagination begins to open up as he sees “a blinding red-gold sun moved serenely from under a purple cloud”<sup>76</sup> (CS 382). He sees the treeline, black against the crimson sky, like the brittle wall of “the frail defense he had set up in his mind to protect him from what was coming” (CS 382). Feeling his old life exhausted, Asbury begins to await the coming of the new. His death was not physical as he anticipated, but a death to his old self and way of seeing the world. Previously, Asbury had noticed water stains along the top molding directly over his bed that formed the image of a fierce bird with spread wings and icicles in its beak, wings, and tail. The stain had been there since his childhood and “had always irritated and sometimes had frightened him. He had often had the illusion that it was in motion and about to descend mysteriously and set the icicle on his head” (CS 366). Now, Asbury begins to feel a peculiar chill as:

The fierce bird which through the years of his childhood and the days of his illness had been poised over his head, waiting mysteriously, appeared all at once in motion . . . the last film of illusion was torn as if by a whirlwind from his

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<sup>75</sup> Asbury's eyes being shocked clean is paralleled in Tarwater's scorched eyes in *The Violent Bear it Away*. The eyes being shocked or purged are able to see the world in a completely new way—one where the spiritual is seen through the material.

<sup>76</sup> The blinding sun recalls Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus where a blinding light knocks him to the ground in Acts chapter 9. This epiphany leads to Saul's conversion from an ardent persecutor of Christians to the Apostle to the Gentiles. Purple is typically symbolic of royalty. The presence of God's glory is often visually described in terms of the shekinah glory cloud. God's transforming presence is clearly evident in this imagery.

eyes.<sup>77</sup> He saw that for the rest of his days, frail, racked, but enduring, he would live in the face of a purifying terror. A feeble cry, a last impossible protest escaped him. But the Holy Ghost, emblazoned in ice instead of fire, continued, implacable, to descend. (CS 382)

When Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River, the Holy Spirit visibly descended on Him in the bodily form of a dove (Luke 3:22). The pouring out of the Spirit is symbolized in the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation.

The fierce bird formed by water that Asbury saw appeared over his head from the time he was young like a baptism waiting to be consummated, but held in suspension. In Matthew 3:11, John the Baptist prophesied concerning Jesus as follows: “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” In *Portrait*, Stephen’s epiphany at the beach involves a beautiful girl whose bosom appears to him “soft and slight, slight and soft as the breast of some darkplumaged dove” (*Portrait* 171). Both O’Connor and Joyce use the imagery of baptismal rebirth. Both associated sacramental imagery with epiphany, but to different ends. As Shloss notes, Joyce “adapted the religious pattern and terminology to secular experience . . . Notice the inversion of the religious concept. Epiphany is no longer a passive human experience—the revelation of a god who is active . . . Rather Joyce emphasizes the role of man’s mind and imagination” (105). Though both Joyce and O’Connor see the mundane as a potential pathway to the transcendent, Joyce emphasizes human initiative through the creative

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<sup>77</sup> This also seems to be an allusion to Saul’s blinding by a vision of Jesus on the road to Damascus. When Ananias laid his hands on him and prayed for him, scales fell from Saul’s eyes and he was able to see again.

insight of the poet while O'Connor highlights God's intervention in giving sight to the spiritually blind.

Wood takes exception to O'Connor's ending in "Chill." In *The Comedy of Redemption*, he argues that "This horrific ending is all too typical of Flannery O'Connor's stories. It reveals . . . her dubious conviction that the iron fist of negation must smash all human pretense before the glad hand of grace can lift up. Such a fearful negativity threatens . . . to convert the joyful tidings of the Gospel into a baleful word that is spat upon the world with misanthropic contempt" (125). Wood would rewrite the ending with Asbury's mother giving the final word that would deflate his moral pretense with an appropriately comic touch that matches the rest of the story. Although I find Wood an incredibly insightful critic concerning O'Connor's work in most respects, I think he is off base here. Asbury moves from welcoming death as the one consoling gift of the god of art he worshipped to being assaulted by the unwelcome gift of spiritual life from a God that he was seeking to avoid all his life. In my view, O'Connor's ending under such circumstances is far more in keeping with the crisis of conscience and complete overturning of his worldview that occurs in an instant. Wood's reading fails to take into account that O'Connor is responding to Joycean imagery found throughout the story. This is not misanthropic contempt spat upon the world, but bold benediction spoken upon it in sacramental terms. O'Connor's art reflects the ironic costliness of grace.

Shloss summarizes the contrast between Joyce's and Woolf's more modern concept of epiphany and O'Connor's more ancient concept as follows:

[O'Connor's] portrayal of the nature of that truth [that is normally concealed except in extraordinary circumstances] or the manner of its disclosure reveals a sensibility radically removed from either Joyce's or Woolf's. She seemed to feel more of an affinity with the ancient concept of epiphany, and hence she tended to emphasize a divine movement-human response pattern, whereby people are no longer agents of epiphany through the movements of their minds, but the recipients of some great and even unsought knowledge. (107)

While both Stephen's and Asbury's epiphanies are life-changing and involve sacramental imagery, Stephen is seen as the artificer who beholds transcendent mysteries through the power of his own imagination apart from any divine revelation. On the other hand, Asbury is a reluctant convert whose imagination fails him until God intervenes by his Word and Spirit and gives him new vision to see himself, the world, and the divine.<sup>78</sup>

As was discussed in chapters 4 and 5, Joyce takes the sacramental imagery his imagination was steeped in from birth and through it "celebrates the marriage of the sacred and profane" (Schloss 106). Joyce seeks the transcendent apart from a personal God who becomes incarnate to save. In "The Enduring Chill," O'Connor clearly responds to Joyce by asserting the hopelessness of finding true meaning apart from a gracious God who seeks to save the lost sheep, even when they purposely wander from Him. Both shun

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<sup>78</sup> Aiken suggests that "perhaps [O'Connor] wished to confess that all epiphanal experiences are God-centered rather than man-centered events. What Asbury receives he is clearly given" (257). Aiken finds the conclusion of "Chill" heavy-handed on O'Connor's part. He calls attention to her lamentation that "The major difference between the novel as written in the eighteenth century and the novel as we usually find it today is the disappearance from it of the author . . . By the time we get to James Joyce, the author is nowhere to be found in the book" (*MM* 74). Commenting on this passage, Aiken notes that "O'Connor felt a narrative was flawed if the author failed to reveal a clear moral judgment" (257). In "Chill," he contends O'Connor has too blatantly entered the story as the author. Her moral judgment on Asbury's situation is clearly unambiguous and unnuanced.



the Manichean tendency to separate matter from spirit. Both see the bread of daily experience as the material from which transcendent insights are borne. As Gabriele Scott Robinson notes in her article “Irish Joyce and Southern O’Connor,” “Both are concerned ‘to penetrate the surface of reality and to find in each thing the spirit which makes itself and holds the world together . . . that is, to find the universal in the particular . . . To both, every detail, the sublime as well as the dreary, has the potential to open out into mystery’”<sup>79</sup> (96). But Joyce sees the artist-priest as turning the commonplace into the source of human epiphanies apart from any divine revelation whereas O’Connor believes that the ability to see the spiritual embedded in the material is a gift of God who desires to reveal Himself even to those who are reluctant or resolved to avoid Him.

Another commonality between Joyce and O’Connor is the use of grotesque realism. This characteristic of Joyce’s work was discussed in Chapter 4 with reference to Bakhtin’s understanding of the concept. Referencing Bakhtin, Saxton connects this approach to both O’Connor and Dostoevsky noting that “O’Connor sometimes suggests that the way to holiness is through degradation” (99). The way of the incarnation and the crucifixion is the path to degradation that precedes glorification. Therefore, “renewal is

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<sup>79</sup> Robinson compares Joyce’s short story “Araby” with O’Connor’s “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.” She notes that “The subject of both stories is an initiation which is in each case brought about by a fair. The fair seems to represent a child’s Holy Grail, comprising all his dreams from the sexual to the spiritual. Sex and religion are linked in both tales. Both also center on an epiphany” (84). Joyce’s coming of age story is one that begins in enchantment and ends in disillusionment for the young boy protagonist. Before he sets out for the fair, the unnamed boy thought “The syllables of the word *Araby* were called to me through the silence in which my soul luxuriated and cast an eastern enchantment over me” (23), but the story ends with the boy “Gazing up into the darkness [seeing himself] as a creature driven and derided by vanity: and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (26). The boy’s romantic dreams of childhood collapse in the disenchantment of reality. His experience is emblematic of modern man. By contrast, the unnamed girl in “Temple” begins with disenchantment and moves toward epiphany through the sacrament of the Eucharist, which helps her encounter mystery, love, and beauty in the mundane. This contrast is also seen in Ecclesiastes 1:2, “Vanity of vanities! All is vanity.” Ecclesiastes compares a view of life “under the sun” that makes it seem vain and meaningless with a vantage point above the sun that makes it possible to enjoy life as a gift from God rather than a “grasping after wind” even though God’s ways are not always understandable.

not achieved apart from grotesquerie, but through it” (107). Similarly, O’Connor’s characters must often be brought low before that are prepared to rise.

Saxton argues that “The grotesque allowed O’Connor and Dostoevsky to conflate the material and the ideal, the ‘high and the ‘low’” (99). As in Joyce, breaking down the dualism between spirit and matter is accomplished through the use of the grotesque. The high is brought low only so that the low might become a means of raising the imagination upward through sensual and metaphoric means. From Saxton’s perspective, references to the incarnation in the works of both O’Connor and Dostoevsky are consistent with Bakhtin’s crusade against negative attitudes toward the body (100).<sup>80</sup> Within Eastern Orthodoxy all matter is potentially divine. Similarly, O’Connor’s sacramental vision stressed the holiness of matter (100). Therefore, whether in Joyce or O’Connor, anything in the material world can point beyond itself to the transcendent.

### ***Conclusion***

From birth, Flannery O’Connor’s imagination was saturated in the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, which trained her to view all of Creation sacramentally. She perceives mystery hidden everywhere in plain sight from a secular age that hungers for fulfillment, meaning, and significance, but searches for it in all the wrong places. Rather than just diagnosing the symptoms of modernity’s coming apart, she offers hope as a Christian humanist based on her belief that God is actively working in the world to redeem what He has created. As a prophet, she shouts and draws startling

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<sup>80</sup> Saxton seeks to illustrate his ideas concerning the deployment of the grotesque in O’Connor’s short stories, “Revelation” and “Parker’s Back.” He argues that O’Connor like Dostoevsky “often places the source of redemption in the most grotesque” (100). He also indicates that O’Connor often uses carnivals as “a site of illumination in which the classic standards of beauty are challenged and inverted” (106). In this regard, his examples include the tattooed man in “Parker’s Back” and the hermaphrodite in “Temple.”

figures for an audience of readers that is often hard of hearing and nearly blind to spiritual realities underlying all of existence. Shock is often needed to shake society from its spiritual slumbers, so she employs her own beguiling mixture of violence, the grotesque, and tragicomedy to reveal the true nature of God's love and grace. As a poet, she uses metaphors and symbols to make connections between the noumenal and phenomenal aspects of existence, seeing them as inextricably united in one tapestry of the real. Because connecting the material with the spiritual is what sacraments do, it is not surprising that she uses sacramental imagery to reveal mystery in her fiction. For O'Connor, sacramental allusions are no mere literary device, they are the foundation for seeing the world as it really is.

O'Connor's art is fundamentally incarnational. It rejects every form of dualism: body/soul, physical/spiritual, nature/grace, secular/sacred, reason/imagination, vision/judgment, etc. Her art and her faith coalesce into a distinctive vision and style that is uniquely her own. Like Joyce, she believes that the material world can lead to epiphanies that connect people with transcendent realities, but whereas Joyce places his confidence in the artist's imagination, her trust is in God's initiative to reveal mysteries. Along with Joyce, she uses grotesque realism to undo the sacred/secular distinction and employs sacramental imagery to make the commonplace a vehicle for apprehending the transcendent. While admiring Joyce's artistry, she challenges his vision of reality and points to the completeness she finds in Catholicism. O'Connor recaptures the sacramental imagination that was largely lost after the early modern period and with it challenges the alienation, nihilism, and fragmentation of modernity. As poet and prophet she calls her

readers to recover sacramental vision that sees through the eye to unspeakable Mystery, which alone can satisfy the hungry human soul.

While there is certainly no writer quite like O'Connor, there is another Southern prophet/poet who shares a sacramental vision with her—Wendell Berry. Born a little more than nine years after O'Connor, Berry is still alive and has been given more years to develop his own impressive oeuvre of novels, short stories, poetry, and non-fiction works. While O'Connor was born and bred a Catholic, Berry comes from a Protestant background, the separated brethren as O'Connor referred to them. Yet, he considers himself a marginal Christian, probably because there are so few who share his sacramental vision for all of life. How do their voices converge and how do they diverge as Christians from such different backgrounds? How does Berry's approach to sacramental imagery differ from that of Joyce given that they do not share a Catholic heritage? The remaining chapters of this thesis will explore these questions and in so doing seek to deepen the understanding of how three modern writers employ sacramental imagery as a way to link the seen with the unseen.

## Chapter 7

### A “Panner-Rammer” of Sacraments Brings Parker Back

One of Flannery O’Connor’s greatest mystery stories involves a connoisseur of sorts. O. E. Parker is a compulsive collector of art obsessively searching for one last masterpiece to become the pièce de résistance of his collection. He has travelled the world and found eclectic images to add to his assemblage in foreign lands like Japan and Burma as well as the United States. Each addition only satisfies him for a short time before the thrill wears off. He feels compelled to fulfill the vision of a single intricate design of a brilliant arabesque of color that enthralled his emotions at the age of fourteen.<sup>81</sup> Fourteen years later, the pieces may be individually interesting, but the whole of his collection appears to him as something haphazard and botched. Disappointed and dissatisfied, in his fixation he can’t sleep or eat much. There is but one space remaining in his gallery and the image he seeks is intended to consummate his aesthetic vision and provide ultimate fulfillment and vindication. Bedraggled and needled by his obsession, he

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<sup>81</sup> That Parker experiences life-altering epiphanies at the ages of 14 and 28 is significant. According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online*: “The numbers which are unmistakably used with more or less symbolic meaning are 7 and its multiples, and 3, 4, 10 and 12 . . . By far the most prominent of these is the number 7, which is referred to in one way or another in nearly 600 passages in the Bible . . . There is clear evidence in the cuneiform texts, which are our earliest authorities, that the Babylonians regarded 7 as the number of totality, of completeness . . . The number 7 plays a conspicuous part in a multitude of passages giving rules for worship or purification, or recording ritual actions . . . The significance of 7 extends to its multiples. Fourteen, or twice 7, is possibly symbolic in some cases. The stress laid in the Old Testament on the 14th of the month as the day of the Passover (Ex 12:6 and Ex 16:1-36 Ex 16 other places), and the regulation that 14 lambs were to be offered on each of the 7 days of the Feast of Tabernacles (Nu 29:13,15) hint at design in the selection of the number.” The encyclopedia goes on to note that the significance may have originally come from an easily observable natural phenomena like the 7 days and a fraction in the four phases of the moon. With that in mind, Parker becomes half enlightened with his first epiphany of the tattooed man at the fair when he was 14 and fully enlightened when he was 28 and has the epiphany of his soul as an arabesque of beautiful color. The epiphany of embodiment becomes fulfilled in the epiphany of the spirit. Francis Tarwater was also 14 when he experiences his life-changing epiphanies in *The Violent Bear it Away*.

makes his pilgrimage barefoot to a tattoo parlor. Erudite aesthete? Far from it. Parker is a crass country redneck and his canvas is his flesh. Over time, he has accumulated a motley array of tattoos as part of his search for significance. Will he finally find completeness and peace in his last tattoo?

In her last work, “Parker’s Back,” that was completed only shortly before she died, Flannery O’Connor erected a short story full of signs, sacraments, symbols, and scripture references that is a microcosm of the fullness of grace she saw offered in the Catholic Church. She layers up imagery that is as visually rich, complex, and overpowering as the religious art in the Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Baptist near her childhood home in Savannah, Georgia.<sup>82</sup> As Susan Srigley indicates in *Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art*, “Many scholars, and indeed O’Connor herself, have identified her theological orientation as sacramental” (2-3). Although various literary critics have commented on the sacramental character of “Parker’s Back,” their focus seems largely to have revolved around signs, symbols, and icons rather than the actual sacraments of the Catholic Church. In this chapter, I will seek to enter into the longstanding conversation by demonstrating that the story is a sustained critique of gnostic forms of Christianity that complements her earlier critique of the Enlightenment project in works such as *The Violent Bear it Away*. I will also show how a more literal reading of the sacramental allusions adds richness and greater depth of understanding to

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<sup>82</sup> Entering the Catholic Cathedral of St. John the Baptist that is in eyeshot of O’Connor’s childhood home in Savannah, Georgia, and the place where she attended mass growing up, is almost overwhelming in its visual splendor. The eye beholds a panorama of beautiful marble columns, majestic arches, stained glass, carved wooden stations of the cross, paintings, sculptures, alter, and baptismal font. Everything in this panoply seems to conspire to lift human souls from earth into heaven through the senses. It seems likely that such stirring imagery fed O’Connor’s poetic imagination.

the interpretation of “Parker’s Back” and O’Connor’s entire oeuvre. Finally, I will demonstrate how the epiphanies Parker experiences are indicative of his growing sacramental imagination and progressively allow him to know God and himself more fully.

In “‘Something Haphazard and Botched’: Flannery O’Connor’s Critique of the Visual in ‘Parker’s Back,’” Thomas Haddox argues that O’Connor’s short story is a sustained critique of Enlightenment rationalism with its emphasis on visual means of knowing and controlling the world. He notes that:

The story presents a sustained critique of the rigidly rationalistic definition of vision associated with the Enlightenment and thus participates in . . . the ‘antiofocentric,’ anti-Enlightenment project of much of twentieth-century Western thought that questions our ability to know and master the world through observation. (409)

Thus, Haddox aligns himself with the thought of twentieth-century French intellectuals who held the “utmost suspicion” about the French Enlightenment heritage, seeing it as the “wellspring of the nightmares of modernity” (410). Haddox notes that the Enlightenment emphasis on the supremacy of the visual traces back to the ancient Greeks, but has been assailed by much of twentieth-century Western thought with criticism from both religious conservatives and feminists alike (409, 410, 414).

Haddox refers to Parker’s tattoos as the story’s central symbol and indicates that they serve as an example of attempting to transform the self through visual spectacle, which ultimately fails (412). Although Parker is not able to outwardly obtain the “perfect

arabesque” he observed on the tattooed man as a teenager, Haddox contends that this may have served as a fortunate fall that ultimately leads to his vision of internal transformation near the end of the story (421). There seems to be no doubt that the vision of the tattooed man that Parker saw at the fair at the age of fourteen is tightly linked with the internal transformation that occurs fourteen years later. However, it also seems reasonable to conclude that there would be no internal vision of the beautiful arabesque of his soul without the sign of the incarnated arabesque at the fair. The tattooed man’s body represents a beautiful and integrated whole that produces wonder<sup>83</sup> in Parker and a belief that he can be uniquely significant. Therefore, the tattooed man functions sacramentally for Parker—an embodied and visually apprehended means of grace that ultimately leads to salvation as he connects the physical sign to spiritual realities that are invisible except to the sanctified imagination.

According to Haddox’s reading, Sarah Ruth is unrelentingly hostile toward vision, but displays an affinity with other senses like hearing, touch, and taste. As a critic of ocularcentrism and a proponent of the tactile, Haddox contends that Sarah Ruth can be aligned with certain feminist theories (417). He argues that she feminizes Parker and gains victory over him (417). Rather than seeing Sarah Ruth as a heretic, Haddox sees her

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<sup>83</sup> While he was in the navy for five years, Parker “seemed a natural part of the grey mechanized ship, except for his eyes, which were the same pale slate-color as the ocean and reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea” (CW 658-9). Parker maintains his openness to a sense of wonder despite the general disenchantment of modernity that drains life of mystery based on its mechanistic materialism. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud describes the source of religious energy experienced by a friend and many others as follows: “It is a feeling which he would call a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling of something limitless, unbounded—as it were, ‘oceanic’ . . . One may, he thinks, rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion . . . If I have understood my friend rightly, he means the same thing by it as the consolation offered by an original and somewhat eccentric dramatist to his hero who is facing a self-inflicted death. ‘We cannot fall out of this world.’ That is to say, it is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole” (24-5). Parker’s eyes seem to reflect this oceanic desire for oneness with the world, which is a mystery that Freud cannot easily deal with scientifically.



as O'Connor's champion who bashes the ocular thinking of the Enlightenment with as much vigor as she clobbers her husband with a broom.

I disagree with Haddox's assessment that "Parker's Back" is antiocular. Instead, I agree with Dennis Slattery<sup>84</sup> statement in "Faith in Search of an Image: The Iconic Dimension of Flannery O'Connor's 'Parker's Back,'" that "'Parker's Back' explores how an individual learns to focus his moral vision on the visible creation in order to apprehend, if even for an instant, the invisible presence of the Creator by means of grace" (120). O'Connor's critique is not of the visual per se, but of a failure to see the unseen through that which can be physically seen. O'Connor notes that: "The novelist begins his work where human knowledge begins—with the senses; he works through the limitations of matter" (*MM* 155). She goes on to note that "Only in and by these sense experiences does the fiction writer approach a contemplative knowledge of the mystery they embody" (*MM* 172). These statements make it clear that O'Connor's view of the incarnational art of the writer must embrace all the senses. Far from relegating the sense of sight to a lesser place among the senses, O'Connor strongly approves of Joseph Conrad's assessment that "his aim as an artist was to do the highest possible justice to the visible universe . . . because it suggested an invisible one" (*MM* 157).

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<sup>84</sup> Slattery explores the way in which the icon serves as "an embodied image of Parker's experience of grace" (120). Slattery contrasts Parker "whose body is resplendent with images, and Sarah Ruth, who is a woman without images. She is, also, a person without imagination" (120). According to Slattery, "the icon is a visible, external expression of the invisible spiritual transfiguration of man" (120). He contrasts the Old Testament image that focused on word without image with the New Testament manifestation of both word and image (121). He argues that "*vision* is the fundamental action of 'Parker's Back'" with dozens of references to the eyes. Slattery contends that "the act of envisioning the world is also the central conflict between Parker and his wife" (121). Whereas "Parker's experience is one in which grace intrudes into the temporal world through the things of the world, the iconoclast, Sarah Ruth "ignores the art of the icon wherein the image reveals . . . the invisible *in* the visible so that the invisible is mysteriously present" (122).

In *A Wreck on the Road to Damascus*, Brian Ragen notes that “The Catholic Church at its moments of greatest solemnity tries to involve all the body’s senses. At an Easter vigil, for example, a Catholic will smell incense, hear music, see rich vestments and ritual actions, taste the bread and wine consecrated in the Eucharist, and see himself sprinkled with water” (50). For O’Connor an orthodox Christian novelist is one who “believes the natural world contains the supernatural” (*MM* 175). In O’Connor’s view, the failure to comprehend and experience that truth through all the senses is what it means to be really blind, deaf, etc. In a letter to one of her friends, O’Connor made it clear that Sarah Ruth was the heretic in the story (*CW* 1218). Therefore, to see her as the heroine that triumphs over Enlightenment rationalism as well as her husband who is the clear hero of the story seems like too much of a reach. Although I would concur with Haddox that Sarah Ruth is not completely unresponsive to sensual pleasures and that she appears to be antiocular with her “gray and sharp eyes that are like two icepicks” (*CW* 655), it seems that O’Connor is clearly critiquing and not commending Sarah Ruth for her failure to apprehend and enjoy the physical goodness of creation in a way that leads her to the mystery of the incarnation.

Instead, I contend that “Parker’s Back” is a sustained critique of gnostic Christianity, which complements her critique of the Enlightenment project in her other works like *The Violent Bear it Away*, “Good Country People,” and “The Enduring Chill.” O’Connor rejects body-soul dualism in both its religious and secular manifestations. As discussed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3, the body-soul dualism that was championed by both gnostic forms of Christianity and scientific materialism triumphed over and largely

eclipsed the sacramental imagination that predominated in the West up until the early modern period.

There are many parallels between the protagonists of “Parker’s Back” and *The Violent Bear it Away*, Parker and Francis Tarwater, respectively. The antagonists that seek to lead them astray from the sacramental imagination are Sarah Ruth (Parker’s wife) and Rayber (Tarwater’s uncle). Sarah Ruth is the quintessential gnostic Christian. She denies the incarnation. When she sees the tattoo of Christ on her husband’s back, she says, “It ain’t nobody I know” and she says of God, “He don’t *look* . . . He’s a spirit. No man shall see his face” (CW 674). Sarah Ruth is spiritual, but she is utterly gnostic. Gnosticism represents one extreme of the body-soul dualism that is so common in modern Christianity, especially among Protestants, as Philip Lee explores in depth in *Against the Protestant Gnostics*.

The other extreme is the scientific materialism espoused by Rayber, an atheistic school teacher. Rayber “intended to stretch the boy’s mind by introducing him to his ancestor, the fish [at the natural history museum], and to all the great wastes of unexplored time” (CW 417). Rayber dedicates himself to ridding young Tarwater of everything Mason Tarwater, his great-uncle and Christian prophet, taught him, saying to himself: “I will cure him” (CW 422). As he tried to convince him of the vacuity of Christianity, Rayber told Tarwater, “I have the guts not be become the prey of superstitions . . . 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 fellowman in this life is all of my portion

and I'm content with it.<sup>85</sup> It's enough to be a man" (CW 437). Rayber views Christianity in particular and religion in general as mere superstition. For him, the great dignity of man as cosmic accident is to assert the self against the void and pursue secular humanism.

Rayber seeks to rid Tarwater of any vestiges of his sacramental imagination, arguing that "Baptism is only an empty act . . . If there's any way to be born again, it's a way that you accomplish yourself . . . It's nothing you get from above by spilling a little water and a few words" (CW 450-1). For Rayber, there is only one way to be born again—through one's own intellectual efforts (CW 451). In his nihilism, he thought "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 his indifference was the most that human dignity could achieve . . . to feel nothing was peace" (CW 454). Rayber's scientific materialism leads to meaninglessness and hopelessness, the ultimate trajectory and nadir of the Enlightenment project.

Although I don't concur with Haddox's line of thought regarding the focus of "Parker's Back," multiple of O'Connor's other works can certainly be seen as a critique of aspects of Enlightenment rationalism, which questioned traditional authority and championed the idea that mankind can be improved through rational means apart from religion and revelation. O'Connor noted that "we live in a world that since the sixteenth century has been increasingly dominated by secular thought . . . [so] the Catholic writer

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<sup>85</sup> This view of Rayber's seems consistent with James Joyce's protagonist Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*. It is interesting to consider if O'Connor is again entering into an authorial dialogue with Joyce who paints his own secular humanist in a much more positive light. Although Bloom seems to share Rayber's expressed atheism, he does appreciate what the sacraments and religion do for people and does not seem to take it as his mission to rid them of what he perceives as their false notions.

often finds himself writing in and for a world that is unprepared and unwilling to see the meaning of life as he sees it” (*MM* 185). The many forms of secular thought that O’Connor holds up for comedic derision in her fiction like materialism, existentialism, and nihilism can be seen as the offspring of Enlightenment thinking.

In “The Heterodoxy of Flannery O’Connor’s Book Reviews,” Wood provides a summary of O’Connor’s book review on Jacques Maritain’s *The Range of Reason*. Wood notes that she acclaims the book for “its insistence that faith and rationality do not contradict each other. Indeed it was the Enlightenment attempt to substitute reason for revelation that led, ironically, to our diminishing regard for the rational. The result, in the present age, is that we have come to doubt not only reason but also fact and value” (14). As someone who read St. Thomas Aquinas on a regular basis, O’Connor was not opposed to the rational per se, but only against the severing of reason from faith, which ends up being fatal to both.

What Haddox argues is true of “Parker’s Back” can more fittingly be applied to *The Violent Bear it Away*: “The story presents a sustained critique of the rigidly rationalistic definition of vision associated with the Enlightenment and thus participates in what Martin Jay has called the ‘antiocularcentric,’ anti-Enlightenment project of much of twentieth-century Western thought that questions our ability to know and master the world through observation” (409). Cartesian rationalism and Baconian positivism triumphed over the sacramental imagination that had been wounded by the Reformation drift away from an emphasis on the sacraments in favor of a bibliocentric view like that of Sarah Ruth. However, as I argued in the previous chapter, O’Connor is not inveighing against ocularism per se, but in a failure to see through and not just with the eye in

William Blake's idiom. Emphasizing what the eyes can see is not at the root of the Enlightenment problem, but a lack of vision that sees the mystery underlying matter. Like Hulga Hopewell and Manley Pointer in "Good Country People" and Asbury Fox in "The Enduring Chill," Rayber in his nihilism can only see through to nothing. In the words of Jesus, "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand" (Matthew 13:13).

Thus, "Parker's Back" and *The Violent Bear it Away* can be viewed as bookends in O'Connor's dual critique of gnostic Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism/positivism, the strange bedfellows that spawned the anti-sacramental worldview and along with it the siblings of nihilism, alienation, and destruction of the world. As the previous chapter indicated, O'Connor sees sacramentality at the heart of true Christianity. Therefore, she seeks to slay the dragons of gnosticism and secularity with her potent pen. As Ralph Wood indicates in "The Catholic Faith of Flannery O'Connor's Protestant Characters," "Her devotion to the Church of Rome made her deeply critical of the same Southern Protestants whose fierceness of faith she admired. She is especially troubled by the anti-sacramental character of their Christianity. It leaves them, she laments, with nothing to guide their faith nor to curb their heresies" (16). The sacraments are essential to keep Christians from heresy according to O'Connor, no matter how hard they otherwise cling to the Bible. Sarah Ruth is a case in point.

Sarah Ruth is a grotesque, an extreme version of Karl Barth's thesis that "preaching serves as the Protestant sacrament," which accounts for "the gnostic quality of American religion . . . an anti-sacramental gnosticism" (*Christ-Haunted* 155). Although the central events of the Bible emphasize the unity of spirit and body (i.e., creation of

Adam and Eve; incarnation, death, bodily resurrection, ascension of Christ; and promise of a new heavens and new Earth), O'Connor avers that the truth must be embodied through the sacraments in order to avoid the heresy of Gnosticism that has tempted Christianity almost from its inception. O'Connor identifies the modern spirit with the ancient Manichaeism that "sought pure spirit and tried to approach the infinite directly without any mediation of matter" (*MM* 68). This is an apt summary of Sarah Ruth who is the exemplar par excellence of the Manichean heresy in modernity. Her icepick-like eyes (*CW* 655) contrast with the oceanic eyes of her husband (*CW* 658-9). His are open to wonder and enchantment that move from the physical to the metaphysical. Hers pierce in their judgement of others, but do not penetrate to the heart of the mystery of God's grace through the incarnation. Similarly, O'Connor indicates that "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" (*MM* 112). Sarah Ruth's eyes are open to detecting sin, but not receiving grace.

If anti-sacramental Gnosticism threatens the integrity of the Christian life from the inside, the modern world founded on the Enlightenment secularization thesis attacks it from the outside. The previous chapter noted that for O'Connor the meaning of life was sacramentally centered. In "The Sacred Text Reconsidered," Sarah Beckwith argues that "The very concept of religion—as separate from, say, politics, the economy, and even science—is a relatively recent development which has been back-projected on histories to which such a concept is alien" (535). The secularization thesis assumes that religion must be relegated to the private sphere as a personal matter. It dismisses the relevance of spiritual concerns from the public square—separating fact from value, matter from spirit.

The Enlightenment guillotine is swift to sever all that the sacramental imagination had previously held in unity: mind and spirit, rationality and imagination, nature and grace, etc. Recovering a sacramental imagination like Parker's is necessary to regain integration.

Having demonstrated that the focus of "Parker's Back" is primarily a critique of gnostic forms of Christianity, I will now turn to the antithesis of Gnosticism in all its forms: the sacramental imagination, which also is the antidote for the ills of Enlightenment rationalism. More specifically, I will seek to deepen the understanding of the significance of sacramental imagery in "Parker's Back" by showing how O'Connor alludes to all seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. I believe that my more literal reading of the presence of sacramental imagery will add depth of understanding to the preceding conversation about her culminating work. In "An Encounter with Flannery O'Connor and 'Parker's Back,'" Alfred Corn notes that:

you could make an argument, based on the story, in favor of a new sacrament—call it, perhaps, the Rite of Iconic Engraving. For if a sacrament is an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual truth, one sees that tattooing, however negative its social connotations and however little authorized by tradition, could serve to enact spiritual truths not different in kind from those symbolized in Baptism, the Eucharist, Marriage, and Ordination . . . think of the priest (and perhaps the writer as well) as a Tattoo Artist of the Soul. (118)

While I concur with Corn's assessment of the significance of sacraments and the sacramental nature of the story, I don't think he goes far enough in recognizing that the sacraments of the Catholic Church are already present in the story in a symbolic sense.



However, before dealing with each of the seven sacraments in turn, it is important to consider the general significance of sacraments and how they function together.

Because O'Connor is writing from a Roman Catholic perspective, I will draw from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to indicate the nature of specific sacraments and refer to it as simply "*Catechism*" in other references below. The *Catechism* summarizes the importance of the sacraments in the following way:

Christ instituted the sacraments of the new law. There are seven: Baptism, Confirmation (or Chrismation), the Eucharist, Penance, the Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders and Matrimony. The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life. (1210)

Thus, Catholics see a correlation between natural and spiritual life in the nature of the sacraments. The sacraments are "physical acts that bring grace" (Ragen 20), which were instituted by Christ. By their very nature, the sacraments acknowledge that God created men and women as embodied souls. As Helen Andretta indicates in "The Hylomorphic Sacramentalism of 'Parker's Back,'"<sup>86</sup> "The sacraments are incarnational in that they require proper matter and form to effect grace . . . [which] flows mysteriously from God

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<sup>86</sup> Andretta notes that "Parker's Back" "seems to evidence the significance of the 'sacramentalized' unity of body and soul" (41). She argues that "the 'sacramentalism' in 'Parker's Back' is based on the hylomorphic doctrine of theologian-philosopher Thomas Aquinas" (42). She explains that "Hylomorphism is the philosophical doctrine that all natural things are essentially constituted of 'prime matter' . . . and 'substantial form' . . . This doctrine developed from Aristotle's definition of change in *De anima* and *Physica*, was a view of reality expanded by Thomas Aquinas into an understanding of human nature as composed of co-principles of physical body and rational soul" (43). In terms of "Parker's Back" more specifically, Andretta sees the hylomorphic interpretation lying "in considering Parker and Sarah Ruth as the complementary aspects of body and soul, each in need of the other" (62).

to humankind through matter” (49). The sacraments communicate grace through the five senses in a variety of ways based on their specific nature. In her affirmation of the goodness of human beings created as spirits intimately joined to bodies, O’Connor sometimes explicitly and sometimes subtly refers to all seven sacraments in Parker’s life.

The *Catechism* divides the seven sacraments into three groups based on their function: 1) sacraments of initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist), 2) sacraments of healing (Penance/Reconciliation and Anointing of the Sick), and 3) sacraments at the service of communion (Matrimony and Holy Orders). As was previously noted in Chapter 4, part of the beauty and power of the seven sacraments is how they encompass all of life, from birth to death and everywhere in between. I will discuss each of the sacraments in turn as they are grouped into the categories above beginning with the sacraments of Christian initiation.

Baptism is the initiatory sacrament of entrance into the visible church and is a symbol of cleansing through washing with water. Parker’s mother was a Methodist and she had him baptized when he was only a month old (*CW* 662). Parker’s full name, Obadiah Elihue, that he refuses to acknowledge until the end of the story is written on his baptismal record. However, Parker is so violently opposed to his double Christian name that he nearly killed a man who used it when it leaked out of the navy files and he threatened to crack Sarah Ruth’s head open if she spoke it aloud to anyone (*CW* 662).

According to André Bleikasten,<sup>87</sup> Parker “rejects his given body, even as he rejects his

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<sup>87</sup> In “Writing on the Flesh: Tattoos and Taboos in ‘Parker’s Back,’” Bleikasten argues that “O’Connor obviously wanted the story to be read in religious terms, as that of a Christian *malgré lui* [in spite of himself], and so thought to reduce ambiguity to a minimum, instead of resorting to the more risky procedures of indirection she had adopted in most of her earlier fiction” (9). Referencing the epiphany that Parker has when he sees the tattooed man at the fair, Bleikasten notes that one might also see the story “less

name, because he wants to become the sovereign shaper of his own gorgeous self” (17). Shortening of his Christian name to his initials only is a conscious act of the will to deny his Christian heritage symbolized in Baptism and to forge his own identity, which is a truncated version of self that denies his spiritual existence. Yet, Parker’s acceptance of his given name near the end of the story represents a confession of faith that brings to fruition the grace symbolized in his baptism. In addition, to prepare for the tracing of the tattoo of Christ on his back, Parker complies with the tattoo artists command to “wash his back at the sink with the special soap” (CW 668), which might be viewed as a symbolic washing away of sin that points back to his original baptism. He must be washed clean to prepare himself for the coming of Christ onto his body.

While Baptism is the sacrament symbolizing entry into the visible church that is typically applied to the infants of believers, Confirmation is the sacrament of mature Christian commitment applied to those who have reached the age of discretion such that they are able to understand and embrace the basic truths of the faith. Catholic theologian Clifford Howell<sup>88</sup> notes that the external sign of confirmation involves anointing with oil and the laying on of the hands (50). There is a clear emphasis on the Holy Spirit, which is represented by the anointing oil applied to the forehead of those being confirmed as they

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spiritually and more psychologically, as the beginning of an ‘identity crisis,’ a period of psychic disturbance taking Parker to the verge of madness. And what seems to be at stake in this crisis is above all his *body*” (11) He observes that Parker sees how the tattooed man managed “to achieve unity, integrity, and harmony, by making his body into an artifact, a work of art, and so comes quite naturally to serve as a paradigm to Parker’s own imaginarily anticipated metamorphosis” (12). He goes on to contend that what draws Parker to Sarah Ruth is her otherness. He argues that her role is to perform a socializing or civilizing task “often assigned to woman in American fiction” (13).

<sup>88</sup> Howell’s *Of Sacraments and Sacrifice* originally appeared as a series of articles in a liturgical review. According to Howell, the articles were intended to be intelligible to readers that had no liturgical background. His expressed desire was that the articles would help beginners and those who desire to spread knowledge of the Catholic liturgy. I am using his analysis to supplement the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in the discussion of some sacraments.

kneel before the officiating priest. When Parker bursts into the tattoo parlor barefoot and bedraggled to get a tattoo of God on his back, the tattoo artist thinks he is drunk.

A similar confusion occurred when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost<sup>89</sup> as recorded in Acts 2:14-15. When observers saw the way Christian believers were behaving after the Holy Spirit came upon them, they thought they had had too much wine. Peter stood up and said “These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning. No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.” Peter had to correct their misperception and assure them that they were not drunk, but that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit was the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy. After Parker hits a tree and it bursts into flames, he immediately drives fifty miles from the field to the city to get the tattoo on his back. Pentecost means fifty and refers to the fifty days between Easter and the date when the church celebrates the descending of the Holy Spirit on the apostles. It appears that O’Connor is using the symbolic number fifty to connect the distance Parker travels to get his tattoo of Christ with Pentecost.

Referring to Jesus, John the Baptist said, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). This prophecy seems to be fulfilled in Acts 2:3-4, when the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus’s disciples: “They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of

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<sup>89</sup> According to the *New Bible Dictionary*, the Feast of Pentecost (Leviticus 23:16) comes from the Hebrew for fifty days, “referring to the number of days from the offering of the barley sheaf at the beginning of the Passover. On the 50<sup>th</sup> day was the feast of Pentecost. Since the time elapsed was 7 weeks, it was called . . . ‘feast of weeks’ (Ex. 34:22; Dt. 16:10). It marks the completion of the barley harvest” (909). There are three references to Pentecost in the New Testament, including Acts 2:1. “On this day, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ . . . the disciples were gathered in a house in Jerusalem and were visited with signs from heaven. The Holy Spirit descended upon them, and new life, power and blessing was evident” (909).

them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.” When the tractor he was driving hit a tree and burst into flames, Parker seems to undergo a baptism with fire. So much so, that his shoes caught on fire. As noted above, Parker had been baptized with water as an infant. Like water, fire is associated with cleansing by purging. O’Connor uses this fiery cleansing as symbolism for spiritual rebirth elsewhere, including *The Violent Bear it Away*, where Tarwater’s change in perspective after being raped by the Luciferian stranger, is described as follows: “His eyes looked small and seedlike . . . they had been lifted out, scorched, and dropped back into his head” (CW 472). Parker’s baptism with fire is indicative of the Holy Spirit coming upon him.

Before outlining the tattoo on Parker’s back, the tattoo artist “swabbed his back with ethyl chloride,” which seems to represent a type of anointing consistent with the sacrament of Confirmation. As an adult, Parker chooses to align himself with Jesus by having the Pantocrator (“All-Demanding” Byzantine Christ) tattooed on his back. The individual undergoing confirmation either chooses a Christian name (i.e., of a saint or biblical character) to add to their name or uses the Christian name given to them at Baptism. At the end of the story, Parker finally identifies himself with the name on his baptismal certificate, Obadiah Elihue, at which point “he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts” (CW 673). Previously in the pool hall scene when other patrons who knew him asked Parker if he got the tattoo of Christ because he had been saved, he denied it three times in a manner that evokes Peter’s threefold denial of Christ. Later in the gospels account, the resurrected Christ restores Peter by asking him three times if he

loves him. In a similar way, Sarah Ruth asks Parker, “Who’s there?” four times before he affirms his given name as Obadiah (Servant of God) Elihue (He is my God). Thus, Parker’s Confirmation is completed.<sup>90</sup>

As was noted earlier, Confirmation also involves the laying on of hands. Just prior to hitting the tree in the field with the tractor, Parker “saw the tree reaching out to grasp him” (CW 665). Afterwards, in the Haven of Light Christian Mission, he saw the tree reaching out to grasp him again before bursting into flame as he lay awake unable to sleep (CW 669). The tree that burst into flames is clearly associated with God and the laying on of hands in this case is divine and direct rather than mediated through a priest. As Howell indicates, “The laying on of hands was also customary in the conferring of some office or responsibility on person faced with new duties, or entering a new state of life. In confirmation, then, the Christian is charged with the duties of full participation in the life of the Christian community of the Mystical Body—which involves, in particular, the Christian Mysteries of worship” (51). Parker’s preoccupation with his own body is

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<sup>90</sup> Howell notes that in “olden days” the sacrament of penance was only used for mortal sins. He indicates that the penitents “were all sentenced to be excluded from the body of the faithful. All were solemnly expelled from the church and knelt down outside the door.” After the bishop standing in the doorway exhorted them not to despair of God’s mercy, “the doors of the church were shut against the penitents, and they stayed outside listening wistfully to the strains of those within as they celebrated with psalm and song the Sacrifice of ‘God’s holy people.’” The climax occurred when the bishop himself accompanied by the clergy went to the door. The *arch*-deacon sang to him “a humble and noble petition saying that these penitents, and all the Christian brethren on their behalf, begged him to restore these members of the body of the faithful and re-admit them to participation in the communal Sacrifice.” The bishop then returned to his throne and ordered the penitents to be brought to him. The penitents prostrated themselves before being bidden to stand up and receiving absolution from the bishop (80-1). Whether O’Connor has this ancient practice in mind when she places Parker outside the door is not clear; however, his acknowledgement of his Christian name appears highly significant. Another possibility is that there is an allusion to Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.” There is a sense in which Jesus is knocking and bidding Sarah Ruth to let Him in. A dual meaning certainly seems plausible.

the precursor for his being joined to the mystical body of Christ's church and participation in its life that is simultaneously physical and spiritual.

Following the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation comes the Eucharist. Prior to experiencing his epiphany at the age of fourteen when he saw the tattooed man at the fair, O'Connor notes that Parker was "as ordinary as a loaf of bread" (CW 658). It is hard to conceive of anything more commonplace than a loaf of bread. Yet, in the Eucharist, Catholics believe that common bread is transformed into the literal body of Christ. Thus, that which is most ordinary becomes the most extraordinary substance on earth and a spiritually life giving means of grace to the recipients. In this subtle simile, O'Connor seems to be foreshadowing the conversion of Parker when his flesh and spirit are transformed by receiving the tattoo of the incarnate Christ on his back. Rather than having the divine host enter his body by consuming it, Parker takes Christ's body onto his own flesh when he receives the tattoo on his back. Prior to getting the tattoo of Christ, his "loss of flesh" implies hunger, but his agitation seems more in keeping with spiritual hunger like that experienced by Tarwater prior to his conversion. At the Haven of Light Christian Mission he receives a free meal of sorts, but the phosphorescent cross glowing at the end of the room where he was trying to sleep seems to reflect what he is truly hungry for—the Bread of Life (CW 669).

Taken together, Catholics view Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist as the sacraments of Christian initiation, which the *Catechism* indicates "lay the *foundations* of every Christian life" (1212). Parker's spiritual journey during the story parallels his physical journey in a manner that is consistent with a Catholic understanding of the

initiatory sacraments. Yet, the other four sacraments of the Catholic Church can also be seen in his life through the story.

The sacraments of healing in the Catholic Church include Penance and Anointing of the Sick, which affirm that Christians are subject to spiritual weakening from sin and physical illness, suffering, and death. The *Catechism* notes that:

The Lord Jesus Christ, physician of our souls and bodies, who forgave the sins of the paralytic and restored him to bodily health, has willed that his Church continue, in the power of the Holy Spirit, his work of healing and salvation, even among her own members. This is the purpose of the two sacraments of healing: the sacrament of Penance and the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. (1421)

Thus, Catholic doctrine holistically addresses ailments of the spirit and body, and these sacraments are also alluded to in “Parker’s Back.”

The *Catechism* indicates that: “The sacrament of Penance is a whole consisting in three actions of the penitent and the priest's absolution. The penitent's acts are repentance, confession or disclosure of sins to the priest, and the intention to make reparation and do works of reparation” (1491). When he was obsessing over what kind of tattoo to get on his back Parker “thought about it so much that he began to lose sleep” and he “was already losing flesh” (*CW* 664). Although the wording implies that he might be losing weight because of Sarah Ruth’s bad cooking, it seems more plausible given his state of mind that he was not eating much, which is indicative of a kind of fasting that is consistent with penance.



However, Parker's penance becomes more acute when he crashes the tractor into the tree and it bursts into flame. After crying out "GOD ABOVE!", the reader is told that "if he had known how to cross himself he would have done it" (CW 665). In retreating away from the fiery tree, "he collapsed on his knees twice," assuming a posture of humble worship. The emphasis is on his moving backward and repentance is a turning away from sin and back to God. As he got in his truck and drove to the city to get a tattoo on his back, he "knew there had been a great change in his life, a leap forward into a worse unknown, and there was nothing he could do about it. It was for all intents and purposes accomplished" (CW 666). This clearly implies a change of course, repentance, and faith. Therefore, in every respect his words, posture, actions, and thoughts reflect those of a penitent sinner who recognizes he is in the presence of the holy.

Parker's determination to then immediately go to the city to get a tattoo of God on his back can be seen as further evidence of his penitential state of mind. He is not dissuaded from getting an elaborate tattoo of a Byzantine Christ even though the tattoo artist indicates "That'll cost you plenty" (CW 667). Indeed the price of the tattoo he was quoted was everything that he had in his wallet—three ten dollar bills (CW 667). Both three and ten are considered numbers of completeness in biblical symbolism,<sup>91</sup> so there is heightening of the imagery in combining the numbers together. The number thirty may

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<sup>91</sup> The *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online* discusses significant numbers in the Bible. It notes "The number three seems early to have attracted attention as the number in which beginning, middle and end are most distinctly marked, and to have been therefore regarded as symbolic of a complete and ordered whole . . . 3 readily suggested completeness, and was often used with a glance at that meaning in daily life and daily speech" (V.2). As the basis of the decimal system, which probably originated in counting with the fingers, 10 has been a significant number in all historical ages . . . many other examples show plainly that 10 was a favorite symbolic number suggestive of a rounded total, large or small, according to circumstances. The number played a prominent part in later Jewish life and thought" (V.4).

also be a reference to the thirty pieces of silver that Judas was paid to betray Christ,<sup>92</sup> but in this case the treachery is actually reversed as Parker pays the price on Christ's behalf.

Parker further shows his devotion by arriving at the tattoo parlor an hour early on the second day and sitting in the dark hallway on the floor as he waited for the artist to arrive. When the tattoo artist asks Parker if he is getting the tattoo because he has been saved, he denies it; however, the "words seemed to leave his mouth like wraiths and to evaporate at once as if he had never uttered them" (*CW* 669). Parker had to know that getting a tattoo of Christ on his back would leave him open to ridicule from any of his usual friends and acquaintances, and he experiences just that when he goes to the pool hall. Prior to drawing the tattoo on Parker's back, the tattoo artist told him "It's your funeral" (*CW* 667), which seems to emphasize that he understood that having such a tattoo on his back in that culture was likely to lead to a lifetime of derision. After being thrown out of the pool hall, Parker sits on the ground in the alley for a long time "examining his soul," which he saw as "a spider web of facts and lies" (*CW* 672). He knew for certain at that point that the eyes on his back must be obeyed. This seems very much like a scene of repentance.

The story also closes on a penitential note as Parker is silent and does not resist when he is brutally beaten by Sarah Ruth with her broom until welts form over the face of Christ on his back (*CW* 674), much like Christ was silent when he was arrested and beaten.<sup>93</sup> No earthly priest tells Parker what penance for his sins should entail, but the

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<sup>92</sup> Matthew 26:15.

<sup>93</sup> In *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetics of Revelation*, John Sykes notes that "His condition signals repentance and rebirth, and this change is directly tied to Christ's suffering, which Parker is made to bodily share; the welts on Christ's face are also welts on his back, a direct reminder of Jesus's scourging and of the fact that by his stripes we are healed." He goes on to state that "The process of

“all-demanding eyes of the Byzantine Christ” he saw in the tattoo book compelled him to “GO BACK” and in complete silence he felt that he was told which tattoo to choose (*CW* 667). As the story closes, Parker is “crying like a baby” and leaning against the pecan tree in front of his home (*CW* 675). Parker’s home is situated on an embankment, which recalls the hill of Golgotha where Christ was crucified. Although his tears could be interpreted in different ways, it seems consistent with the rest of the story to associate his tears with repentance. The cross that Christ died on is often represented as a tree and one can sacramentally see Parker’s penance as being accepted by the Lord as he clings to the tree and weeps bitterly.<sup>94</sup>

While arguing against the idea that the story is a vivid expression of Catholic sacramentalism, Haddox claims that the evocation of sympathy for Parker at the end represents a more genuine Catholic understanding of grace (408). Although seeing Parker weeping like a baby under the pecan tree at the end of the story may evoke genuine pathos, one cannot take any legitimate shortcuts if they would understand him in light of an authentic understanding of grace. Far from a proponent for cheap grace, O’Connor’s fiction in general and “Parker’s Back” in particular demonstrates that salvation is a work of grace that often devastates its recipients by undercutting all their godless support structures. Ultimately, Parker is not a pitiable figure, but one who has been humbled and

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Parker’s redemption thus includes his body. In fact, we might say that it is the vehicle of his spiritual renewal, for it literally takes on Christ in the form of the tattoo, and it allows him to join in Christ’s pain” (52).

<sup>94</sup> In *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, Bernard Cooke indicates that “Grace is the transformation of human persons under the impact of God’s loving self-gift in Christ. This transformation comes about through the reinterpretation of life’s experiences in the light of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. Christian sacraments are those elements of Christians’ life experience that mediate this reinterpretation and thereby transform human existence into new and unending life” (238). This summary seems to reflect well what Parker experiences. The sacraments help him interpret his own life experience by identifying with Jesus through the sacraments, which capture the significance of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

fallen, yet who has completed an epic journey from longing to fulfillment. He has embraced his true nature as an embodied soul and submitted to the Pantocrator who has been pursuing him for so many years and has finally latched onto his back for eternity.

In addition to being a penitent, Parker is also sick and in need of physical healing. His agitation and uneasiness seem to be the primary cause of his illness. Along with losing sleep, losing weight, and having a nervous tic, his eyes are described multiple times as looking hollow and cavernous (*CW* 665, 666). When the tattoo is complete and Parker won't look at it, the artist asks him "What ails you?" After seeing the tattoo, Parker turns white. His back is obviously sore from the tattooing, which becomes evident when an acquaintance slaps him on the back as he enters the pool hall (*CW* 671). Later, after receiving the beating from Sarah Ruth with her broom, welts form on his back (*CW* 674). Parker's soul sickness leads to physical sickness and he needs the sacrament of healing, which typically involves anointing with oil and prayer.

Again, the swabbing of Parker's back with ethyl chloride by the tattoo artist might be symbolic of anointing. In addition, Christ means anointed one and "Parker's tattoo is an etymologically literal instance of a signifier of Christ, rubbed into Parker's skin as an act of indelible anointing" (Streight 6).<sup>95</sup> At the Haven of Light Christian Mission where he received food, shoes, and a cot from unidentified people (*CW* 669), Parker entered looking sick, bedraggled, poor, and uneasy to the extreme. After getting the tattoo,

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<sup>95</sup> In "Is There a Text in This Man? A Semiotic Reading of 'Parker's Back,'" Irwin Streight argues that "The truth of O'Connor's fiction, its mystery, is most accessible by way of a semiotic approach to her texts" (1). He goes on to indicate that "Parker's Back" "evidences a strong privileging of semiosis as the means to a full understanding of the story" and that it is "a story about signs and signification" (2). In contrast to Haddox's arguments that the story is anti-ocular, Streight notes that "look" is the only word O'Connor italicized in her text and notes that Parker has been made to "see" the series of visual signs. He suggests that "O'Connor is expressing the necessity of the transcendental signified to be known incarnationally, to be embodied in the Word made text/flesh" (9).

Parker's "dissatisfaction was gone" (CW 672) and when he acknowledged his Christian name "he felt light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul in a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (CW 673). Therefore, it appears that his spiritual healing has been completed and given that most of his physical ailments seemed closely linked to his spiritual maladies, it can be assumed that he is on his way to healing in both body and soul.

With regard to the last two sacraments, the *Catechism* indicates that "Holy Orders and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others; if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so. They confer a particular mission in the Church and serve to build up the People of God" (1534). Although Parker's marriage to Sarah Ruth is an unhappy one, their union does appear to have been a means of grace that helped lead him to salvation. Parker is bewildered as to why he is attracted to a woman that he finds ugly, is pregnant, a poor cook, repelled by his tattoos, and who is continually warning him about the judgement seat of God. As Andretta explains, "there is an incompleteness to Parker's being. He hungers for a fulfillment of self. In desiring to please Sarah Ruth, Parker is longing to satisfy himself with what she 'seems' to have so completely—a spirituality that if embraced by him will make him attractive to her" (55). Her perceived spirituality is what makes Sarah Ruth so different from the women that were attracted to Parker's tattoos.

Parker and his wife represent the poles of materialism and gnostic<sup>96</sup> Christianity, respectively. Parker is subconsciously attracted to Sarah Ruth because he longs for the

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<sup>96</sup> Wood argues that "Parker is as thoroughly sacramental in his imagination as Sarah Ruth is gnostic in hers" (*Christ-Haunted* 46). He notes that "The Bible-citing Sarah Ruth has not come to the Father because she has refused to come to his enfleshed Son. She wants to separate the spirit and the body into

spirituality that he is missing and that she represents for him. It isn't clear why Sarah Ruth is attracted to Parker, but he surmised that it is either because she wants to save him or because "she actually liked everything she said she didn't" (CW 655). When Parker revealed his biblical first and middle name to her, "Her face slowly brightened as if the name came as a sign to her" (CW 662). Since this is perhaps the only time in the story that she smiles, it could be argued that she sees the potential that two double biblical names could have if joined in matrimony. Although there may be some merit in each of these reasons, I believe that Sarah Ruth's propensity for "forever sniffing up sin" (CW 655) revealed her desire for someone to spiritually lord it over.

In addition to representing the poles of Gnosticism and materialism, Sarah Ruth and Parker also represent the juxtaposition of law and grace, respectively, much like police inspector Javert and Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*. As Saint Paul indicates, "Before faith came, we were held prisoners by the law, locked up until faith should be revealed" (Galatians 3: 23). Richard Giannone notes that Sarah Ruth brandishes the "broom as her scepter of control" and "portrays a country female version of Kafka's Commandant, who reigns in his story, 'In the Penal Colony.'" In that place of punishment "guilt is never to be doubted" (223). The broom, which might normally be

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hermetically sealed spheres" (*Christ-Haunted* 49). Conversely, he contends that "Like Enoch Emory in O'Connor's first novel, young Parker has 'wise blood,' a natural instinct for discerning the outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace" (*Christ-Haunted* 44). In my view, when their marriage begins, Parker and Sarah Ruth represent opposite extremes that are both far from a sacramental imagination. Sarah Ruth thinks she has found spiritual truth and so seeks nothing, but self-congratulation as she sniffs out the sin of others. Whereas, Parker knows he is missing something and so continues to seek it in the only way he knows how. Like O'Connor's short story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," the difference is reminiscent of Jesus's story about the Pharisee and the tax collector who went to the temple to pray. The self-righteous Pharisee thanks God that he is not a sinner like the tax collector while the tax collector recognizes he is a sinner and beats his breast and asks for mercy. They each receive what they seek; only one receives mercy. An argument might be made that a materialist whose imagination is captured by the wonder of beauty has a better chance of coming to true faith than a gnostic Christian.

associated as a symbol of submissive feminine domesticity, becomes a weapon of judgement to be wielded against her husband to bring him to heel spiritually. Because her religion was primarily focused on keeping a set of external rules, it must have been gratifying for the broom wielding, browbeating Sarah Ruth to have a husband that made her feel so spiritually superior. Jesus castigated the Pharisees for paying scrupulous attention to manmade rules while neglecting the weightier matters of the law like loving God fully and loving your neighbor as yourself. Sarah Ruth's life is almost joyless because it is graceless.

When Sarah Ruth sees the tattoo of Christ on Parker's back she says "It ain't anybody I know" (CW 674). Indeed it seems clear that she doesn't really know Jesus because she doesn't fully embrace his incarnation as the God-man. She continues to view God as only spirit, failing to acknowledge that the Word has become flesh. Like Hazel Motes in O'Connor's novel *Wise Blood*, Sarah Ruth appears to have had "a deep black wordless conviction . . . that the best way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin" (CW 11). Because her religion is one of external rule keeping, she doesn't feel the need for the means of grace that are offered through the visible church, which she rejects as idolatrous (CW 663).<sup>97</sup> Indeed since Christ identifies the church as his body on earth, it is logical that her Gnosticism leads to denial of both the incarnated Christ and the Church. Although "Marriage did not change Sarah Ruth a jot" (CW 663) and she shows herself to be a heretic, her otherness is a means of grace that woos Parker toward genuine spiritual renewal. As the passage from Galatians cited above indicates, the law was meant to lead

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<sup>97</sup> Wood notes that "The antisacramental Sarah Ruth seeks the impossible: she wants to be a solitary Christian, alone with her Bible and her God, independent of all other believers" (*Christ-Haunted* 49).

people to the grace found in Christ, which is the role Sarah Ruth plays in Parker's life. Rather than becoming a gnostic Pharisee like his wife, Parker ultimately embraces Christ, His grace and incarnation.

According to St. Paul, marriage is intended by God to be a representation of Christ's relationship with his bride, the Church (Ephesians 5:22-33). When a man and woman are joined together in marriage they "become one flesh" (Ephesians 5:31). As Howell indicates, "because, in human nature, the body is the instrument through which the soul expresses itself, God made the bodies of men and women such that they could express, even in a bodily action, their love for each other" (61). Ideally, Parker in his fleshiness and Sarah Ruth in her spirituality would have joined together in a harmonious unity. Instead, the way they are pitted against one another is symbolic of the duality between body and soul that pervades Western culture. Love is intended to be embodied. In Christ's incarnation, God and man were joined in one person. Howell notes that "matrimony signifies union. Hence the underlying reality in the sacramental order of existence is Christ's union. It is His union, then, that becomes the union of Christians who marry" (62). As St. Paul points out, this is a profound mystery. O'Connor indicates that grace is often made most apparent by its absence. This seems to be the case in Parker's and Sarah Ruth's marriage. Yet, even so, God uses Sarah Ruth's otherness to bring Parker to faith.

In terms of the sacrament of Holy Orders, it seems clear that Parker becomes a reluctant prophet who proclaims God's truth despite himself. There are clear allusions to four prophetic figures in the story: Jonah, Moses, Paul, and Obadiah. There are two scenes that directly or indirectly make reference to the prophet Jonah in the story. When



his Methodist mother tries to bring him to a revival service when he was a teenager, he ran away and joined the navy (CW 658). Parker's mode of escape from his calling by God paralleled that of Jonah who took a ship in the opposite direction rather than going to Nineveh. Later, when Parker is thrown out of the pool hall, "a calm descended on the pool hall as nerve shattering as if the long barnlike room were the ship from which Jonah had been cast into the sea" (CW 672). This reference to Jonah being thrown from the boat by pagans, which led to a calming of the storm, is explicit.

Parker's experience also parallels that of another reluctant prophet, Moses. The tree that bursts into flame when Parker hits it with a tractor is clearly reminiscent of the burning bush that Moses saw in the wilderness.<sup>98</sup> While God in the burning bush bid Moses to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground, Parker's shoes fly off and catch on fire (CW 665). After being called by God to lead his people out of exile, Moses makes a number of excuses as to why he isn't well equipped to do God's bidding. Another reference to Moses can be seen in the description of the revealing of the tattoo on Parker's back when the men in the pool hall forcibly pull his shirt up. After the men see the tattoo of Christ, "Parker felt all the hands drop away instantly and his shirt fell again like a veil over the face" (CW 671). This recalls the need Moses had to cover his face with a veil for a time after he came down from Mount Sinai where he had met with God and the reflected glory was so stark that it made those around him afraid.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Francis Tarwater also experiences a transforming encounter with God reminiscent of the burning bush in *The Violent Bear it Away*: "He whirled toward the treeline. There, rising and spreading in the night, a red-gold tree of fire ascended as if it would consume the darkness in one tremendous burst of flame . . . He knew that this was the fire that had encircled Daniel, that had raised Elijah from the earth, that had spoken to Moses and would in an instant speak to him" (CW 478).

<sup>99</sup> Exodus 34:35.

Parker's being knocked to his back before the burning tree and later encountering an overpowering tree of light on his porch (*CW* 673) recalls St. Paul's conversion, which led him from being a persecutor of the church to the great apostle to the Gentiles. In "The 'All-Demanding Eyes': Following the Old Testament and New Testament Allusions in Flannery O'Connor's 'Parker's Back,'" <sup>100</sup> Jordan Cofer notes that the connection of the Mosaic and Pauline imagery is essential for setting up the development of O'Connor's intended theme. He indicates that the many allusions to the Old Testament, set the reader up to think Sarah Ruth will love the new tattoo on Parker's back. However, Cofer suggests that Parker's prophetic message of justification by faith through grace in a Pauline fashion is one that Sarah Ruth rejects in a manner similar to the Pharisees of the New Testament (38). Before Paul and Barnabas were sent out to be missionaries to the Gentiles, the leaders of the church in Antioch laid their hands on them to commission them (Acts 13:2-3). The practice of laying on of hands to set apart people for special service to God continues today and the discussion above about laying on of hands regarding Parker's Confirmation would also apply to his being set apart as a prophet. Lastly, Parker is named after the Old Testament prophet Obadiah. Ultimately, Parker recognizes without a doubt that the all-demanding eyes of Christ must be obeyed and he quits resisting his holy calling to serve as a prophet of God.

As Howell indicates, "In the sacrament of holy orders something is signified, namely, the beginning of a function of mediation between God and man. Candidates at

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<sup>100</sup> Cofer seeks to provide a fairly comprehensive explication of Old and New Testament allusions in the story. He notes that "Through Sarah Ruth, O'Connor recapitulates exactly the tension, central to Christianity, in seeing Moses and the Law as only a partial revelation of God and Jesus as the full recognition. Essentially, O'Connor has Parker, a version of both Moses and Saul, offering God's image to Sarah Ruth, a religious hypocrite clinging desperately to the Law of Moses and being rejected the same way that Moses was rejected, Saul was rejected, and, ultimately, Jesus was rejected" (37).

ordination receive an office, a status, for which they are anointed” (72). As a newly anointed prophet set apart by the virtual laying on of hands, Parker with his new tattoo of the Byzantine Christ on his back goes immediately to his old friends at the pool room and bears witness for Christ despite himself. As one of the heckler’s indicates, “O.E.’s got religion and is witnessing for Jesus, ain’t you, O.E.?” (CW 671). After being tossed out of the pool room in Jonah-like fashion, he then goes to show Sarah Ruth his tattoo of Christ. When the tattoo artist asked Parker if he thought his wife would like the new tattoo, he replied “She can’t hep herself . . . She can’t say she don’t like the looks of God” (CW 670). Surprising Sarah Ruth with his new tattoo, he receives the surprise of her rejection of his tattoo of Christ—the incarnated image of the gospel.

Ralph Wood notes that O’Connor “was so committed to her own distinctly Catholic form of the Christian faith that she makes even her Protestant characters its advocates” (“Protestant Characters” 16). “Parker’s Back” clearly is a story illustrative of Wood’s commentary as Sarah Ruth’s rejection of all the sacraments leads her into heresy while her husband finds Christ through full-bodied encounters reminiscent of the Catholic sacraments. As Wood indicates, “in her last published story, ‘Parker’s Back,’ O’Connor offers a strong critique of Southern antisacramentalism” and calls the contemporary church to “maintain the drastic distinctiveness of the gospel . . . by holding hard to the sacraments that evangelical Protestants are prone to neglect” (*Christ-Haunted* 3). By shunning the sacraments<sup>101</sup> (and the Church that becomes a cohesive body through

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<sup>101</sup> Wood notes that Sarah Ruth “is an emblem of a larger suspicion of sacraments that has characterized American culture at least since the day in 1832 when [Ralph Waldo] Emerson refused to celebrate the Lord’s Supper at the Second Church of Boston . . . the same fundamentalists whose Jesus-obsession she admired were dangerously gnostic in their denial of the sacramental presence of God in the natural order, whether in artistic creation or the created cosmos itself . . . for Catholics, divine grace is always mediated through some human or natural agency, rather than being experienced directly” (*Christ-Haunted* 44-5).

them), Sarah Ruth falls into a radical Gnosticism that denies the incarnation, which is at the heart of the gospel. Like the Pharisees, she knows the letter of the law, but totally misses its spirit. By way of contrast, in *Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, and the Aesthetics of Revelation*, John Sykes notes that “Parker is at once a sacramental sign for the reader and a central player in a great drama of which he is but dimly aware. He becomes a kind of icon himself, a window by which the reader may glimpse divine reality as it interpenetrates the earthly, redeeming and restoring it” (53). The story itself takes on a sacramental quality as it represents the interplay between spirit and matter, which is analogous to light shining through a stained glass window, revealing its color and its visual narrative simultaneously. Parker’s story becomes Christ’s story and vice versa; the divine drama is reenacted.

After considering my own views in reading “Parker’s Back” from a more explicit sacramental perspective, it is important to consider potential objections. Haddox notes that many readings of the story have considered “Parker’s Back” as “a particularly apt illustration of Catholic sacramentalism” (407), but he does not see the final scene of the story as constituting a religious awakening. Yet, even if a sacramental way of seeing the story is accepted, one might question if the readings proposed in this chapter have gone too far in making connections to particular sacraments of the Catholic Church rather than just general signs and symbols that serve as means of grace.

O’Connor stated that “When the Catholic novelist closes their own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, the result is another addition to that large body of pious trash for which we have so long been famous” (*MM* 180). In “Parker’s Back” O’Connor has clearly not closed her own eyes to the world around her, but she

unapologetically sees as a serious Catholic artist who, unlike the iconoclastic Sarah Ruth, “believes that the natural world contains the supernatural” (*MM* 175). O’Connor makes it clear that seeing only through the eyes of the Church can lead to sentimentalism and propagandizing that are inimical to good literature (*MM* 188). However, she also notes that “For my part, I shall have to remain well within the Judeo-Christian tradition. I shall have to speak, without apology, of the Church, even when the church is absent; of Christ, even when Christ is not recognized” (*MM* 155). O’Connor’s imagination was saturated with sacramental and Biblical imagery that colored what she saw as a writer.

Although the Church is dismissed and Christ is not seen by any except Parker, they are both very much present in “Parker’s Back.” In “Partaking of the Sacraments with Blake and O’Connor,” Stephen Behrendt<sup>102</sup> notes that:

If by ‘sacrament’ . . . we mean a form or instrument of formal and ritualized behavior that is assumed to confer both grace and spiritual value upon the recipient/participant or ‘communicant,’ then we do well to consider the extent to which O’Connor intended her stories to perform this function upon and within the moral and spiritual consciousness of her reader. (118)

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<sup>102</sup> Behrendt affirms W. A. Sessions advice that the reader “must participate in the text on *its* own terms, not the reader’s, although the reader’s self is never absent” (117). Behrendt uses this starting point to examine “one aspect of the sacramental quality that characterizes the experience of reading O’Connor’s fiction” (118). In order to draw in another perspective to his analysis, he compares O’Connor’s approach with that of William Blake “whose commitment to mystery, vision, and spirituality is equally undeniable” and who along with O’Connor called for carefully delineated detail in art (127). Behrendt asserts that “Like Blake, O’Connor understood that the avenue to this participation in the divine passed through the physical senses” (128). He asserts that both Blake and O’Connor call readers to enter into the text. In this sense, he “remain[s] convinced that the reading process they require of us is inherently ‘sacramental’ in the sense in which these two devoutly Christian writers understood it—that the text becomes the mediating agency in a transfigurative and transubstantive transaction between an eternal creative genius (whether O’Connor’s very Catholic ‘God’ or Blake’s ‘Human Imagination Divine,’ both operating through the artist) and a mortal, temporal reader” (137). Although Behrendt does not refer to James Joyce, his analysis seems like something Joyce would affirm with the exception that the artist, not God, is the genius.

Thus, Behrendt sees O'Connor's stories as intended to have a sacramental function and impact on her readers. Sarah Gordon notes that to her way of thinking "Parker's Back" may be O'Connor's "most clearly Catholic narrative" (Gordon 251). In her last short story, it appears that O'Connor has heaped up sacramental imagery that from a narrative perspective is as rich and almost overpowering as the visual sensation one receives when entering the Catholic Cathedral where she regularly attended mass as a child.

Having considered how O'Connor repudiates gnostic forms of Christianity through Parker's thoroughgoing sacramental adventures that lead him back to God, I will now briefly discuss how the sacramental imagination is linked to Parker's epiphanies. The Enlightenment project denuded the world of mystery. Whatever is not fathomed by humankind is expected to ultimately give way as science continues to make progress. As Richard Jenkins indicates in "Disenchantment, Enchantment, and Re-Enchantment: Max Weber at the Millenium," "the disenchantment of the world lay right at the heart of modernity" (12). Although gnostic Christians may believe in mystery, they do not expect to find it in the material world. Parker experiences four<sup>103</sup> epiphanies that ultimately lead him back to God.

As previously noted, the first epiphany occurs when he was fourteen years old and beheld the "arabesque of men and beasts and flowers" on the skin of the tattooed man at the fair (CW 657). The intricate design consists of representative aspects of the earth's totality of living things: humanity, flora, and fauna. What makes the tattoos so

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<sup>103</sup> According to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia Online*, "The 4 points of the compass and the 4 phases of the moon will have been early noticed, and the former at any rate will have suggested before Biblical times the use of 4 as a symbol of completeness of range, of comprehensive extent. A number representing completeness as previously indicated."

compelling is that they represent “a single intricate design of brilliant color” (*CW* 657). Everything fits together in an integrated way that is beautiful and glorious. Each image complements every other image. The individual birds, beasts, and people may be beautiful, but their relationship to each other is what is truly remarkable. The design is so carefully and ingeniously wrought that when the man flexes his muscles, the images on his skin appear to come to life, each “appeared to have a subtle motion of its own” (*CW* 657). In this vision, the world is not “haphazard and botched,” it is not random or existing by chance. Clearly, the pattern of tattoos pointed to a designer who had the imagination to see things whole—one who cares about beauty and balance. This fills Parker with emotion and wonder; he has moved from the disenchantment of modernity to re-enchantment through what he beholds with his physical senses. The concept of the ideal with its harmony and beauty captures his imagination.

From that time on, Parker’s eyes “reflected the immense spaces around him as if they were a microcosm of the mysterious sea” (*CW* 658-9). Having experienced enchantment by encountering mystery once, Parker remains open to finding it again. Wherever he is in the world, he actively seeks it out. The word microcosm seems important here. Following Blake in his poem “Auguries of Innocence,” Parker seems ready to: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an Hour.” He tries to capture the essence of the mystery with his own collection of tattoos that move from lifeless things (anchors and crossed rifles) to animals (tiger, panthers, cobra, hawks, and peacocks) to human royalty (Elizabeth II and Philip) [*CW* 659]. Parker may be proud of his individual tattoos and there was something that initially attracted him to each of them, but it was

their failure to come together as one coherent design that leads to his huge dissatisfaction. Humans seem to have an inbred need to find coherence in their life and the world.

Part of the problem is that “Long views depressed Parker” because he thought “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). Parker focuses on the microcosm, but he cannot put things together in a meaningful way apart from a coherent view of the macrocosm that can help him relate things to one another. Parker has an innate sense that God or some other authority figure that would restrict his freedom may be lurking in the bigger picture. When the old woman he works for sees him without his shirt on for the first time, she says, “Mr. Parker . . . you’re a walking panner-rammer!” (*CW* 519). Her sarcasm has deeper meaning. Parker chooses not to see the panorama of life in which the physical contains the spiritual, so his own designs are doomed to be haphazard and botched.

As he runs out of skin on the front of his body without achieving the coherent design he envisioned at the age of fourteen, he becomes desperate to find exactly the right one for the only remaining space available, his back. Having apparently realized the futility of achieving what he originally sought, he begins to contemplate a tattoo that “Sarah Ruth would not be able to resist” (*CW* 664), one that would “bring Sarah Ruth to heel” (*CW* 665). Although he wasn’t satisfied with his existing tattoos, they had made him more attractive to the kind of women he generally found desirable. Overcoming Sarah Ruth’s resistance to fully embracing his unique embodiment becomes his new goal. However, he needs a second epiphany to clarify his vision and make him act.



The second epiphany occurs when he hits the large tree with the tractor and the tractor bursts into flames. As previously noted, his exclamation (GOD ABOVE!) and all his actions, make it clear that he realizes he has encountered the holy. Whereas Parker's first epiphany led to re-enchantment of the world with a glimpse of the transcendent, his second epiphany is more like a direct encounter with God, which is still mediated, however, through material things. His second encounter with mystery moves him from a vague notion of the transcendent to a sacramental imagination where the panorama of spiritual and physical existence merge into one landscape.

Parker's third epiphany occurs at the tattoo parlor when he is looking for a suitable religious tattoo representing God. Thumbing through the book, on one of the pages he saw "a pair of eyes glanced at him swiftly." Although he tried to speed past it, in the absolute silence he heard "GO BACK" and knew he had to select the tattoo of "the haloed head of a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes" (CW 667). Again, the epiphany is mediated through the picture in the tattoo book and it moves him from an encounter with God to a face-to-face confrontation with Christ as God-incarnate—the preeminent locus of the spiritual contained within the material, mystery in matter.

Finally, his fourth epiphany comes on the porch of his home when he responds to Sarah Ruth asking who's there by giving his Christian name. At that point, the light of dawn that had pinned him to the door like a lance, penetrated and poured through him "turning his spider web souls into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts" (CW 673). The first and fourth epiphanies are obviously linked and made possible by the intervening epiphanies. However, the single intricate design of brilliant color was reflected in his soul rather than on his body. Now Parker is able to

move from the mystery of the incarnation of Christ to his own existence as an embodied soul transformed by the presence of Christ on him and in him. Once again, the epiphany is sacramentally mediated by material things, which have become conduits of God's grace.

In St. Augustine's Christianized Neoplatonism, the movement involves experiencing good, true, and beautiful things in creation, which then lead the individual to look inward to examine good, true, and beautiful things in their own soul and from there to move upward to God. The pattern in Parker's epiphanies is similar, but different. The beautiful arabesque initially leads Parker to turn toward himself—to see the possibility of wonder in himself. However, his initial focus of wonder is on his body. He needs encounters with God before he is ready to turn inward and see the wonder of his soul in relation to God incarnate. In O'Connor there seems to be an emphasis on the need to know God before one can adequately and fully comprehend the self.

In most of O'Connor's stories, there is one grand epiphany near the end of the story. In "Parker's Back," O'Connor not only layers Biblical allusions and sacramental imagery, she also layers epiphanies in a way that that builds like a crescendo. This illustrates well the point made by Carol Shloss in *Flannery O'Connor's Dark Comedies: The Limits of Inference* that was alluded to in the previous chapter: "[O'Connor] seemed to feel more of an affinity with the ancient concept of epiphany, and hence she tended to emphasize a divine movement-human response pattern, whereby people are no longer agents of epiphany through the movements of their minds, but the recipients of some great and even unsought knowledge" (107). Like Hazel Motes, Parker had the sense that someone was trailing him (CW 664) and that person turns out to be Jesus. God may use a

direct revelation, like the one given to Ruby Turpin in “Revelation,” but more often the epiphanies are sacramentally mediated through something in the physical world.

Flannery O’Connor was a self-consciously Catholic writer of fiction who was on a mission to wake up her modern readers who she thought were for the most part missing ultimate reality whether they be atheists or religious fundamentalists, materialists or Manichaeans. She noted that “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” (*MM* 165). In her final consummating work of fiction, O’Connor is more explicit in her Christian imagery, apparently anxious that her message would not be so easily misunderstood as with some of her earlier works. As Wood indicates, “Flannery O’Connor’s world is profoundly incarnational, sacramental, and thus anti-gnostic. Robert Drake once declared, in fact, that Jesus is the real hero of O’Connor’s fiction” (*Christ-Haunted* 159). “Parker’s Back” epitomizes Woods’s cogent summary. Jesus becomes incarnated in Parker’s flesh and Parker experiences grace sacramentally through his senses. While Parker may be searching for significance and wholeness, it seems clear that Jesus is searching for and finds him.

Through his sacramental odyssey, Parker is ultimately transformed from being a crass country redneck into a corporeal cathedral. As the beauty of stained glass windows can typically only be seen by those inside the cathedral, so the light shining through his soul reflected a beautiful arabesque of colors and images of trees, birds, and beasts that recalls Adam before the Fall in the Garden of Eden; Parker has come back. The longing for wonder, significance, and fulfillment that had seized his imagination from the time he saw the tattooed man at the fair when he was fourteen is ultimately satisfied as he submits

to and obeys the penetrating and all-demanding eyes of Christ in the tattoo on his back. Parker was a reluctant and restless convert, but the experiences and encounters he had, which alluded to the full range of sacraments offered in the Catholic Church, were means of grace that transformed him into a whole person. More than a critique of the Enlightenment or a reflection of a nascent feminism, in “Parker’s Back” O’Connor uses the powers of her incarnational artistry as prophet and poet to help her readers see the goodness of men and women created as embodied souls that though “haphazard and botched” can be transformed through sacramental grace into walking “panner-rammers,” icons that point beyond themselves to the glory of God in whose image they were made.

## Chapter 8

### **The Sacramental Vision and Imagination of a Protestant Poet and Philosopher**

#### **Wendell Berry**

In his essays, fiction, and poetry, Wendell Berry covers a broad range of topics and ideas, including economics, agriculture, war, the environment, marriage, sexuality, politics, technology, religion, freedom, work, the arts, community, and what it means to be human. Perhaps the breadth of his interests is not surprising because he sees connections everywhere and in everything. As philosopher, poet, and prophet, he speaks as one with a compelling and coherent vision of what the good life consists of and the nature of healthy relationships between people, animals, plants, the Earth, and the divine. As Anne Husted Burleigh indicates in her essay, “Marriage in the Membership,” “Berry looks at the world with a sacramental imagination” (15). This sacramental way of seeing the world and everything in it undergirds all of Berry’s literary corpus. Burleigh summarizes the sacramental imagination in the following terms: “The invisible is present in the visible. The work of God’s hand, the things of the earth, are valuable and indeed sacred. The material world is good. It is blessed . . . Things—concrete, touchable, knowable, mysterious things—are good, and they are gift. They are given to us to love, to care for, to reverence” (14).

Because creation is a good gift from God and intended to communicate His love to all his creatures, it is to be received humbly, respectfully, gratefully, and reverently. Created things are knowable, but simultaneously suffused with mystery. In addition, to discussing Berry’s own statements regarding the sacramental nature of life, this chapter will explore how various critics have described the significance of Berry’s sacramental

imagination and how it has informed his fiction, poetry, and non-fiction writings. More specifically, this chapter will cover Berry's spirituality, pansacramentality, the rejection of dualism, the poetry of panentheism, and the poetics of embodiment.

### *A "Marginal" Christian*

Before discussing what others have said about Berry's sacramental approach, it is instructive to understand Berry's religious background and some fundamental aspects of how he relates to the world, other humans, and the divine. Although Berry comes from a Protestant Christian background, he laments that the expressions of Christianity that he finds within his own faith tradition are often diametrically opposed to the central messages of the Bible. As he noted in an interview, "I'm a Christian in a sense I'm uneasy to talk about. From a sectarian point of view I'm a marginal Christian . . . But I do know the Bible; I've always had the sound of the King James Version in my ears and mind all my life. I was never satisfied by the Protestantism that I inherited. I think because of the dualism of soul and body, heaven and Earth, Creator and creation—a dualism so fierce at times that it counted hatred of this life and this world as a virtue" (Dalton 33).

A dualistic view of life is contrary to the sacramental imagination and separates that which God means to be harmoniously joined together. In his essay, "Christianity and the Survival of Creation," Berry notes that he sees "some virtually catastrophic discrepancies between biblical instruction and Christian behavior. I don't mean disreputable Christian behavior, either. The discrepancies I see are between biblical instruction and allegedly respectable Christian behavior" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 95). Even though he sees his own beliefs as grounded in the Bible, he views

much of what is commonly accepted as mainstream Christian ethics as inconsistent with biblical truth with calamitous consequences for the Earth and everything in it. It is in this sense that he is a marginal Christian.

In his writings, Berry points the way to reestablishing a way of seeing the world that will transform how humans relate to it. As Berry indicates in his essay, “The Body and the Earth,” “The Bible’s aim, as I read it, is not the freeing of the spirit from the world. It is the handbook of their interaction. It says that they cannot be divided; that their mutuality, their unity, is inescapable; that they are not reconciled in division, but in harmony” (*Art of the Commonplace* 104). From Berry’s perspective, the Bible, rightly understood, provides practical guidance for achieving harmony that unites. The dualistic disconnect is well illustrated in Berry’s novel *Jayber Crow*.

Jayber, the barber of the fictitious Port William, Kentucky community where most of Berry’s fiction is set, laments the young preachers who “learned to have a very high opinion of God and a very low opinion of His works—although they could tell you that the world had been made by God Himself” (160). The theology that the young pastors had imbibed at seminary leads them to conclude that God is great, but his creative works are in some way deficient and unworthy of Him. Jayber goes on to reflect that “In Port William, more than anyplace else I had been, this religion that scorned the beauty and goodness of this world was a puzzle to me. To begin with, I didn’t think *anybody* believed it” (160). He notes the disjunction between the “world-condemning sermons” preached on Sunday mornings and how the congregants responded during and afterwards as follows:

The people who heard those sermons loved good crops, good gardens, good livestock and work animals and dogs; they loved flowers and the shade of trees, and laughter and music . . . while the wickedness of the flesh was preached from the pulpit, the young husbands and wives and courting couples sat thigh to thigh, full of yearning and joy, and the old people thought of the beauty of the children. And when church was over they would go home to Heavenly dinners of fried chicken, it might be and creamed new potatoes and creamed new peas and hot biscuits and butter and cherry pie and sweet milk and buttermilk. And the preacher and his family would always be invited to eat with somebody and they would always go, and the preacher, having just foresworn on behalf of everybody the joys of the flesh, would eat with unconsecrated relish. (161)

The inherent goodness of the Creation is enjoyed and appreciated by all despite the sermons that inveigh against it. Commenting on this passage in “Sacramental Spirituality in the Brothers Karamazov and Wendell Berry’s Port William Characters,”<sup>104</sup> Hans Gustafson notes that “Jayber recognizes this Gnostic tendency in the church . . . They bathe in the goodness of their God’s creation, yet intellectually reject it as so. Berry’s point here is overtly sacramental, especially in his Eucharistic employment of cherry pie and milk” (357). Although the early church rejected Gnosticism, it still remains an all too tempting alternative to a sacramental understanding of life.

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<sup>104</sup> Gustafson examines sacramental spirituality in three ways: 1) anti-dualism in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, 2) kenotic *theōsis* in Father Zosima (also a character in *The Brothers Karamazov*), and 3) pansacramental vision as seen in some of Berry’s Port William characters. Each of these “exhibit a spirituality connected to the sensual as mediated through sacramental categories” (345). Gustafson’s examples of sacramental spirituality in Berry’s characters include Jayber Crow in Berry’s novel by the same name, Andy Catlett in his novel *Remembering*, and Aunt Fanny in the novel *A Place on Earth*.



### *Pansacramentality*

As historian Mark Noll indicates in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, “Gnostics differed dramatically among themselves in their beliefs and practices, but held in common a fear of matter as inherently evil and a tendency toward ethical extremism (either ardent asceticism or wanton licentiousness)” (52). In contrast to dualistic gnostic tendencies, Gustafson argues that Berry’s approach represents pansacramentality, “the idea that all things hold sacramental potential and are thus able to represent God in the world” (346). Though many Protestants acknowledge only two sacraments and Catholics recognize seven, Gustafson argues that Berry’s “broad view of the sacraments allows for an infinite number of potential sacraments” (346). Gustafson’s view seems consistent with several of Berry’s own statements. In his poem, “How to be a Poet (to Remind Myself),” Berry indicates “There are no unsacred places; / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places” (*Given* 18). In addition to places, Berry views all creatures as inherently holy: “We are holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy” (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 99). Because these holy things are so often desecrated (used for unholy purposes like the ruin of Creation), it is often difficult to view them as such (100).

To make holiness the sole province of the church is to deny the presence of God in all his creation. As Berry indicates in “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” “It is clearly impossible to assign holiness exclusively to the built church without denying holiness to the rest of Creation, which is then said to be ‘secular’” (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 103). The sacred/secular dichotomy falsely limits an omnipresent God who declared that all His creation was good to a narrow sphere. The denial of the

holiness of creation makes it easy to treat it with carelessness or contempt. It also diminishes one's understanding of the Creator.

Berry notes that the Bible explicitly indicates that the creation is God's revelation of Himself in passages such as Psalm 19 ("The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork") and Romans 1:20 ("For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead") [*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 103-4]. Furthermore, Berry denies a kind of Deist approach that would acknowledge God's creation of the world, but deny his intimate connection in sustaining its existence. He indicates that "We will discover that the Creation is not in any sense independent of the Creator, the result of a primal creative act long over and done with, but is the continuous, constant participation of all creatures in the being of God" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 97). As the Apostle Paul indicated in Acts 17:28, "in him we live and move and have our being." The world and everything in it is just as dependent on God for its day to day existence as it was on its creation in the first place.

If the creation is God's representation of Himself and His love gift to all his creatures, then to view it as less than holy is blasphemy. To destroy nature or use it in an unworthy manner "is flinging God's gifts into His face, as if they were of no worth beyond that assigned to them by our destruction of them" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 98). As Gustafson indicates, all things hold the potential to mediate the real presence of God and represent Him in the world; therefore, they hold sacramental potential (346) for those whose senses are attuned to apprehend it. This sacramental spirituality "allows for the retention of an immanent God that dwells in the world, yet is

not reduced to the world as such” (Gustafson 360). Pansacramentalism is not the same as pantheism. It emphasizes God’s immanence in his Creation, but does not deny his transcendence. Like His world, God may be known in a real way, but mystery always remains.

### ***Recovering Orthodoxy and Rejecting Dualism***

The body-soul dualism is also contradicted by the most fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith. As Berry notes, the mutuality of the spirit and the flesh is “not reconciled in division, but in harmony. What else can be meant by the resurrection of the body?” (*Art of the Commonplace* 104). The promise of the resurrection—of souls and bodies being reunited for all eternity—is seen as the Christian’s great hope in passages such as I Corinthians, chapter 15. Furthermore, Christ’s incarnation, resurrection, bodily ascension into heaven, and promised bodily return, all seem to affirm the goodness of embodiment in the strongest possible way. As Jayber Crow thought to himself, “Did Jesus put on our flesh so that we might despise it?” (*Jayber Crow* 50). In his essay, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” Berry decries:

a dualism that manifests itself in several ways: as a cleavage, a radical discontinuity, between Creator and creature, spirit and matter, religion and nature, religion and economy, worship and work, and so on. This dualism . . . is the most destructive disease that afflicts us. In its best-known, its most dangerous, and perhaps its fundamental version, it is the dualism of body and soul. (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 105)

Through its dualism, much of modern Christianity has cut itself off from both nature and culture (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 113).

Dualism divides people from other humans, from the earth, from the divine, and ultimately from themselves. Berry indicates that “these things that appear to be distinct are nevertheless caught in a network of mutual dependence and influence that is the substantiation of their unity” (*Art of the Commonplace* 105). The sacramental imagination is the antidote for dualism in all its forms; rather than a host of divisions, it sees a multitude of sacred connections binding all things together for the glory of God and the good of His creation.

As Jason Peters summarizes the problem in his article “Wendell Berry’s Vindication of the Flesh”:<sup>105</sup>

The dualism against which Berry has consistently spoken we must call by its rightful name: heresy. Whether we call it Manichaeism or Gnosticism makes no difference . . . It is a heresy characterized by suspicion of, if not hatred for, the material world, including our own flesh; it assigns importance only to that which is immaterial—mind, soul, spirit—and holds that salvation comes by knowledge rather than by works or faith. (319)

Berry reflects on this dualistic heresy and its implications in his essay, “A Native Hill,” where he indicates that while posing as orthodoxy, this heresy has “encouraged people to

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<sup>105</sup> In his essay, Peters focuses on Berry’s insights into the “old dualism” between body and soul with references to Berry’s novel, *Jayber Crow*, several of Berry’s essays, and an interview with Berry. Peters notes that this dualism is a heresy that is inconsistent with Christian orthodoxy. He argues that grace is mediated by means of the natural world and notes that the word sacramental with its relationship between the practical and the spiritual is meaningless to the dualist. Peters indicates that the technological revolution consistently favors the mind over the body and notes the incongruity in that our society seeks to avoid physical work while using exercise machines to promote fitness. In addition to Berry, Peters makes reference to Walker Percy’s novel, *Love in the Ruins*, Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and C. S. Lewis’s novel, *That Hideous Strength*, to illustrate aspects of the prevailing dualism. According to Peters, favoring the mind over the body leads to abstraction, alienation, and abuse. He makes connections between the old dualism, Manichaeism, Gnosticism, and a long historical process moving from participation in nature to alienation from it culminating with Descartes.

believe that the world is of no importance, and that their only obligation in it is to submit to certain churchly formulas in order to get to Heaven . . . The Heaven-bent have abused the earth thoughtlessly, by inattention, and their negligence has permitted and encouraged others to abuse it deliberately” (*Art of the Commonplace* 23). How we think about the value of bodies and the material world has tremendous significance for how we treat them. As Berry indicates, “Though Heaven is certainly more important than the earth if all they say about it is true, it is still morally incidental to it and dependent on it, and I can only imagine it and desire it in terms of what I know of the earth. And so my questions do not aspire beyond the earth. They aspire *toward* it and *into* it. Perhaps they aspire *through* it” (*Art of the Commonplace* 23).

If heaven is the realization of ultimate blessedness, its patterns must be learned and practiced on earth. As Berry indicates in “The Body and the Earth,” the world is “the confluence of soul and body, word and flesh, where thoughts must become deeds, where goodness is to be enacted” (*Art of the Commonplace* 104). How would we recognize truth, goodness, and beauty in heaven, if we have not seen them, practiced them, and participated in them to some degree on Earth? Is contemplation of the good more spiritual and beneficial than doing good works for the benefit of others and the Earth? The way one answers these important questions has profound ethical implications for how life is perceived and lived.

Berry’s explication of Genesis 2:7 (“The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a living soul.”) is particularly important for understanding the foundation for his rejection of the body-soul dualism. In his essay, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” he writes:

My mind, like most people's, has been deeply influenced by dualism, and I can see how dualistic minds deal with this verse. They conclude that the formula for man-making is man = body + soul. But that conclusion cannot be derived, except by violence, from Genesis 2:7, which is not dualistic. The formula given in Genesis 2:7 is not man = body + soul; the formula is soul = dust + breath.

According to this verse, God did not make a body and put a soul into it, like a letter into an envelope. He formed man of dust; then, by breathing His breath into it, He made the dust live. The dust, formed as man and made to live, did not *embody* a soul; it *became* a soul. 'Soul' here refers to the whole creature.

Humanity is thus presented to us, in Adam, not as a creature of two discrete parts temporarily glued together but as a single mystery. (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 106)

Berry argues that a right understanding of this fundamental passage of scripture is essential for appreciating what it means to be human.

Regarding the soul and body as distinct and separate entities makes it easy to value one over the other and to set them in competition against each other. If the body is low because it is made from dust and the soul is high because it is made from God's breath, then dualism is logical. As Berry indicates, "the predictable result has been a human creature able to appreciate or tolerate only the 'spiritual' (or mental) part of Creation and full of semiconscious hatred of the 'physical' or 'natural' part . . . This madness constitutes the norm of modern humanity and of modern Christianity" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 107). Chapter 2 of this thesis traces the roots of this duality, which go back at least to Plato. Berry's understanding of the world seems to

reflect that of the natural philosophers that preceded the advent of modern science in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and who saw connections throughout the cosmos.

### *The Ritual Poetry of Panentheism*

Perhaps nowhere else is Berry's sacramental approach to life so clearly demonstrated as in his poetry. As John Lang indicates in "'Close Mystery': Wendell Berry's Poetry of Incarnation,"<sup>106</sup> "Anyone reading Berry for the first time is sure to note the sacramental quality of the poet's response to nature" (259). Through metaphor, poetry provides the ideal language to reconnect people to nature and to the divine. In "Spirit Astir in the World: Wendell Berry's Sacramental Poetry,"<sup>107</sup> Laird Christensen notes that "Berry's poetry urges us to imagine a world in which divinity is manifest in all aspects of the earth community" (165). This manifestation of God in creation represents not pantheism, but what Christensen refers to as panentheism. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes panentheism as follows: "Panentheism considers God and the world to be inter-related with the world being in God and God being in the world . . .

Panentheism seeks to avoid either isolating God from the world as traditional theism

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<sup>106</sup> Lang argues that whereas Flannery O'Connor's fiction "has focused on what she calls 'mystery as it is incarnated in human life,' Berry's poetry has centered upon the mystery incarnate in nonhuman life" (258). He indicates that "Through his poetry. . . Berry seeks to make the transcendent immanent" (260). It seems that Lang is probably correct in stating that Berry places considerably more emphasis on God's immanence than is typical in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. However, I disagree with his contention that "Unlike O'Connor, Berry withholds final assent to Christianity—as if he suspects it of harboring ineradicable antipathy toward the earth" (268). There is no doubt that Berry finds the expression of the body-soul dualism in the mainstream of Christianity to have disastrous consequences in any number of ways, but Berry sees such ideas as totally inconsistent with the Bible's message in both the Old and New Testaments. I believe that Berry's approach is actually more orthodox from a biblical perspective than the mainstream of Christianity and he is responding to widespread heresy like an Old Testament prophet. As Ragan Sutterfield indicates, "much of Berry's work fits the prophetic mode, not only calling for a new way to live, but also a renewal of religion and worship" (138-9). Similarly, Christensen notes that Wendell Berry's project is guided by his commitment to "redeem Christianity from 'failures and errors of Christian practice'" (165).

<sup>107</sup> Christensen indicates that Christians attempting to "reread their faith ecologically" have chosen one of three ways to formulate their environmental ecology: apologetic (recovering ecological elements of the biblical tradition), sacramental (emphasizing the sacredness of creation), and eschatological (presenting the cosmos as promise waiting to be fulfilled). Christensen sees Berry's works as containing all three strains.

often does or identifying God with the world as pantheism does . . . panentheism stresses God's active presence in the world" (Culp 1). According to this view, God is present in and engaged with the physical cosmos, actively upholding and sustaining its existence from moment to moment. As Christensen states, "By asserting the presence of a divine being that is distinct from its creations, but not separate, Berry is able to preserve Christianity's monotheism while resacralizing the material world" (172). God's ongoing presence makes the material world in which He dwells holy, but space, time, and the human mind cannot fully contain an infinite God.

Berry's view is that "Creation is thus God's presence in creatures . . . for to every creature, the gift of life is a portion of the breath and spirit of God" (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 98) As God breathed into Adam and he became a living soul, so God sustains what he has created by continuing to breathe life and existence into all he has made. Again, the Apostle Paul quotes pagan poets to the Athenians on the Areopagus in Acts 17:28 when he states that "For in him we live and move and have our being." If God did not actively uphold the being of all things, they would cease to be. As Lang indicates, "Berry's poetry is profoundly incarnational. It assumes the presence of spirit in matter and witnesses to this mysterious conjunction" (259). This is the antithesis of the Cartesian notion of matter being set in motion by God at the Creation and allowed to operate thereafter according to natural laws with no occult influence.

How does one recapture this way of seeing the world as sacred? Nature poetry has a particular power to provide people with a renewed panentheistic perspective on everything they experience in the heavens and on the earth. In his essay, "A Secular



Pilgrimage,”<sup>108</sup> Berry notes that “the natural effect of such [nature] poetry is the religious one of humility and awe. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that this religious effect might, in turn, produce the moral effect of care and competence and frugality in the use of the world” (16-17). The best nature poetry, helps humans to see themselves not as the center of the cosmos, but as intimately and interdependently connected to every other thing, both living and non-living. Such a humble way of perceiving the world prepares the soul to receive it with awe; the disenchantment of the world that lays at the heart of modernity can be counteracted by re-enchantment.

To be effective in this regard, Christensen notes that poetry “cannot stop at merely describing an experience of humility or awe, nor can it instruct us how to have one; it must *enact* it” (166). This seems to be a good description of Berry’s nature poetry. Enchantment is best understood by experiencing its enactment through the poet’s experience. “Since a poem *becomes* by its reading, the reader participates in a ritual that—if conducted properly—may evoke the intended emotional intensity and model a new way of seeing” (Christensen 166). By reading the poem, the reader enters into the poet’s imaginative consciousness and in a sense sees through their eyes the glory and mystery contained within the cosmos. If enacted regularly, this ritual of poetic reading can retrain the imagination to see again the sacred nature of that which seems secular to modern society.

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<sup>108</sup> Berry’s essay “A Secular Pilgrimage” provides his analysis of the significance of nature poetry, the manner in which it works and its practical effects for good in the lives of those who read it. He mentions the poetry of Gary Snyder, Denise Levertov, and A. R. Ammons as representative of the interest in nature he is pointing to in his essay. He closes his essay by noting that nature poetry “is an effort to suggest that there is in our poetry an impulse to reverence moving toward the world, toward a new pertinence of speech and a new sense of possibility” (35).

Sacred mysteries like the resurrection are not simply eschatological hopes, but present realities being enacted all around us in the soil where dead leaves provide nourishment for seedlings to spring up and flourish. In the opening lines of his poem, “Canticle,” Berry writes: “What death means is not this— / the spirit triumphant in the body’s fall, / praising its absence, feeding on music” (*New Collected Poems* 19). Instead, death is a precursor to new physical life with beautiful emblems like yellow flowers sprouting from the clefts of ancient rocks. This hope of life springing from death is a proper cause for joy as opposed to the dualist’s exultation in the freedom of the soul as it separates from the body. As Christensen notes, “To Berry, the process of material resurrection is at least as miraculous as spiritual rebirth, but this poem complains that the church misses the point” (168). The miraculous is everywhere, but too easily taken for granted by those who fail to comprehend the goodness of creation.

In Sabbath poem “VIII” from 2012, Berry rhetorically asks how we should reply to the language of flowers and birdsong. His answer is “Not / just thanks or praise, but acts / of kindness bespeaking kinship / with the creatures and with Nature” (*This Day* 383). The poet learns by careful observation and quietness what such kindness and kinship look like in practice: faithfulness like the woods, self-denial like the parenthood of birds, and humility and beauty like the flowers. The poet hears nature’s mellifluous voice and beckons his own soul and his readers to respond with conviviality and convocation in a liturgy of call and response, a mutual receiving and giving back in kind. We view the earth and its creatures aright when we see them as family to be loved and cherished, not materials to be exploited at our whim. But we will not hear nature’s voice

if we do not go to her in quietness, respect, humility, and with a desire for harmony, healing, and wholeness.

In Sabbath poem “I” from 1986, Berry writes of the great trees of the woodland: “Receiving sun and giving shade, / Their life’s a benefaction made, / And is a benediction said / Over the living and the dead” (*This Day* 71). As he stands in the woods, the poet sees the trees like priests with their arms upraised saying a blessing not only upon his own head, but on all the living and the dead. The blessing transcends time and gathers those who once lived there, those who now live there, and those who someday will live there in holy convocation—people, plants, birds, and animals. Once more, the trees serve as example, as they receive the good light from the sun as a gift and use that light to make leaves that provide shade to those under their watch care as “Apostles of the living light.” Their limbs harbor birds who sing as a “timbered choir” their blessings upon the sacred woodland. In the autumn, the fallen leaves fly down with the wind and make a carpet of radiance on which to walk. Even in death there is beauty and praise.

The only proper response to such glory and grace is collective praise from all God’s creatures, each with distinct voices, but singing in harmony of being and blessing. Berry “calls for daily practice regulated by a mindfulness that evokes both responsibility and gratitude . . . His poetry enacts our expanded identification with other parts of a divine community” (Christensen 179) Through his poetry, Berry points the way to reconnecting to God and all of creation with joy, reverence, humility, gratitude, respect, openness, and a sense of profound responsibility to past, present, and future generations.

*The Poetics of Embodiment and Home Ethnomics*

In his poetry, fiction, and essays, Berry points to certain touchstones where the poetics of embodiment become firmly grounded in life as lived, including marriage, farming, and homestead. These are places where bodies meet and are joined together in living, and where people's interactions with the Earth and with one another become most intimate. If modern fiction and poetry typically captures the alienation and nihilism of a world that has lost its sense of connections and hope, then Berry's work points to the fundamentals required to regain wholeness and faith. In his article "Wendell Berry and the Poetics of Marriage and Embodiment," Roger Lundin argues that if "Twentieth-century American poetry and fiction tell the sojourns of this *homo absconditus* [the hidden human; a concept of man characterized solely by will and power] and its strained relations with self, with nature, and with God," then Berry's work represents a "crucial counterexample of a rich, rightly ordered poetics of embodiment in twentieth-century literature" (340). Berry's literary focus is best understood if it is contextualized in terms of the currents of Western Civilization and literature that it clearly flows against.

Lundin indicates that Berry's poetics of embodiment receives considerable support from Hans Jonas's summary in *The Gnostic Religion* of a series of intellectual developments that began in the sixteenth century and culminated with the emergence of nihilism in the late nineteenth century (339). He quotes the following passage from Jonas: 'as [man suddenly realizes] he shares no longer in a meaning of nature, but merely, through his body, in its mechanical determination, so nature no longer shares in his inner concerns.' This disconnection and distinction from nature thus results in 'the unbridgeable gulf between [ourselves] and the rest of existence' (339). Humanity's loss

of a shared meaning together with nature leaves it without an anchor, adrift in the vast ocean of the cosmos with no reference point to call home.

In contrast, Odysseus longed for his wife Penelope and his homeland in Ithaca all along his tortuous journey home. Lundin traces this alienation of humans from nature in literature: “Spirit and nature may sport about as a loving couple in the works of Wordsworth, Novalis, and Shelley at the start of the nineteenth century, but their relationship grows fractious by midpoint and openly hostile at its end” (335). This emerging and growing hostility is seen by Lundin as evidenced by the proliferation of orphans in mid-nineteenth century fiction and “a slow but steady tilt towards the imagery of alienation, indifference, and, finally, violence, in the depiction of the spirit’s relationship to nature” (335). Citing specific examples from American literature, Lundin develops the antithesis of modernity’s divorce between nature and spirit as the chiaroscuro against which the light of Berry’s poetics of embodiment may be more clearly seen by contrast.

While briefly noting the prominence of orphans in the nineteenth century English novels of Charles Dickens, Georg Eliot, and the Brontës, Lundin focuses on examples in classic American literature like Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, Stephen Crane’s “The Open Boat,” and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Considering the predicament of humanity’s “cosmic abandonment,” Ahab concludes that ‘Our souls are like those orphans whose unwedded mothers die in bearing them’ (337). In this bleak and lonely picture, “Melville seems to play the role of metaphysical orphan” according to Alfred Kazin (337). Similarly, Lundin summarizes the *Scarlet Letter* in terms of “the story of both a girl’s search for the father who has abandoned her and a

culture's quest to track down a Deity that seems to have gone into hiding" (337). Dimmesdale refuses to publicly acknowledge his paternity of Pearl and leaves her rejected and without a father. Though the absence of God as a father figure in modernity brings with it a certain degree of liberation, "this joy of liberation gives way to the terrors of abandonment" (338). Cutting loose from all connections to God and nature, leaves humans terrifyingly and bewilderingly alone and adrift in the vast cosmos.

However, alienation does not end at indifference, but leads to antagonism like a marriage that ends in a bitter divorce. Lundin cites Crane's short story "The Open Boat," where the only four survivors from a ship that capsized are adrift on the ocean in a small dinghy. In the story, "the narrator speaks of an individual's shock upon learning 'that nature does not regard him as important, and that she feels she would not maim the universe by disposing of him.' The wounded man 'wishes to throw bricks at the temple' but 'hates deeply that there are no bricks and no temples'" (338). If there is no God, who is there to be mad at about the outrageous fortunes of life? He is but a drop in the enormity of nature's ocean, which is completely indifferent to his paltry existence. Rather than being joined in intimate bonds of being with nature and nature's God, humankind in modernity is left abandoned, both orphaned by the divine and divorced from nature.

In contrast to the authors noted above, Lundin sees a kinship between Berry's and William Faulkner's poetics of embodiment citing for example the scene near the end of *Light in August* when Byron Bunch awkwardly pursues marriage with Lena. Lundin recounts the scene as follows: "in a novel marked by bodily violence and spiritual violation, [Byron's] pursuit is poignantly dogged and remarkably restrained. After he makes advances one evening, Lena repels him: 'Why Mr. Bunch, Aint you ashamed. You

might have woke the baby, too’” (341). Rebuked and apparently out of patience, Byron leaves, but the next day he is waiting on the road to be picked up declaring, ‘I done come too far now. I be dog if I’m going to quit now’ to which Lena responds, ‘Aint nobody never said for you to quit’ (341). Lundin quotes critic Cleanth Brooks’s evaluation of the meaning in this scene as follows: “the tension between Byron and Lena shows that Faulkner believed we should ‘stand in awe of nature, and, loving and respecting it, should forbear to violate it.’ At the same time, Faulkner does not expect us to ‘stand perpetually aloof from nature, completely passive and lacking a field of action. Byron needs to learn the mean between a rape and Platonic love’” (341). Lundin concludes his article by noting that “In his understanding of marriage, the body, and the broken beauty of our earthly lives, Wendell Berry has shown us—and continues to show us—how to learn and how to live that mean” (341).

Indeed there are many ways in which one could see the despoiling of the Earth as a type of rapine. Berry illustrates the point as follows: “In order to burn cheap coal we destroy a mountain forever, believing, in the way of lovers of progress, that what is of immediate advantage to us must be a permanent benefit to the universe” (“A Secular Pilgrimage” 10-11). Having cut the ties that once moored humanity to God and nature, the mores and ethos of how to respectfully and humbly treat each other and the world were largely cast overboard as so much flotsam and jetsam. If we continue to live like the arch-narcissist and “prototypical *homo absconditus*” (Lundin 340), Jay Gatsby, we will be doomed to “beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past” (Fitzgerald 189). By way of contrast, Berry quotes Marcus Aurelius’s contention that ‘All things are interwoven each with [the] other: the tie is sacred, and nothing, or next to

nothing is alien to aught else.’ Through his poetics of embodiment, Berry demonstrates “a power to apprehend the unity, the sacred tie, that holds life together” (“A Secular Pilgrimage” 15).

### ***Conclusion***

Against the pervasive dualism that seeks to separate souls from bodies, spirit from matter, and God from his Creation with a host of pernicious results, Berry speaks as a prophet calling our culture back to community, connection, convocation, and conviviality. Like the natural philosophers who preceded the dualism of Descartes, Berry looks out on the world and sees intimate connections between the creation and creator everywhere. Therefore, the distinction between sacred and secular is a false dichotomy. The power of dualistic thinking is deeply embedded in the Western psyche with strong support from both secular and religious worldviews.

This separation engenders competition where there should be cooperation and helps explain the alienation, loss of meaning, nihilism, and abuse of nature that so often characterizes modernity. Recovering the ability to see the world and everything in it sacramentally is the solution that Berry proposes; the way back to health and wholeness. In his fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, he models how a sacramental imagination engages the world and often juxtaposes that way of seeing with the destructive blindness of dualism that separates people firstly from themselves and then from everything else. As Berry illustrates, beholding the world with senses and imagination attuned to the sacramental nature of life can reconnect people to one another, to the Earth, to the divine, and ultimately to themselves.



This chapter will be followed by a close reading of Berry's novel, *Remembering*, as a way to illustrate how his sacramental imagination and some of the key concepts noted above inform his works of fiction. Although many of Berry's works would serve to demonstrate the sacramental nature of his work, *Remembering* was selected because it provides powerful contrasts between the body-soul dualism that Berry inveighs against and the healing and wholeness that comes from recovering a sacramental imagination in the life of one person. Both concepts are seen in the life of the protagonist, Andy Catlett, who plays a prominent role among Port William's membership in Berry's fiction. There are also many parallels between Andy's fictional life and Berry's actual life in a manner akin to James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

## Chapter 9

### **Finding the Way Home: Recovery of the Sacramental Imagination in Wendell Berry's *Remembering***

When Andy Catlett lost his right hand in a piece of mechanized farm equipment in a terrible accident, he lost far more than a vital piece of his body. Andy also lost his connection to himself and all that was dear to him, including his wife, his children, his community, and the place he called home in Kentucky. In his novel, *Remembering*, Wendell Berry chronicles Andy's fall from the life-enriching connections that once held him firm and secure into the alienation, meaninglessness, and hopelessness that too often characterizes the spirit of modernity. However, his fall is not final. On a trip to San Francisco, Andy begins to remember who he is in relation to the people and place that kept their hold on him even when he lost his hold on them.

His memory finally arrests his seemingly perpetual fall into the abyss by grabbing hold bit by bit on the words, shared experiences, and deep, multi-generational connections to family and the particular place that once anchored him. Andy's crisis is ultimately a loss of trust that has separated him from his own body, from other people, and from the world. During his pilgrimage away from home and his return, he rediscovers his sacramental imagination and sees the world once again as gift rather than grievance. The sacramental images in his memory reunite Andy to his body, to other people, to the world, and ultimately to the divine. Though he lives in a fallen world, Andy regains the ability to see all of creation as sacred and connected, holy and whole. He regains the ability to apprehend correspondences that transcend time, but never lose their grounding in a uniting of the spiritual and physical.

Before discussing the manner in which Andy's sacramental imagination was restored, it is important to consider how he lost it in the first place. Andy could not forgive himself for the carelessness that led to the loss of his right hand when he tried to unstop a jammed picker with his bare hand when he and his friends were harvesting corn. Because he was right-handed, he felt the loss acutely every day in a variety of actions that he once took for granted. "He remembered how his body had dressed itself, while his mind thought of something else; how he had shifted burdens from hand to hand; how his right hand had danced with its awkward partner and made it graceful" (*Remembering* 24). Though his left hand was gradually and clumsily learning how to compensate and becoming more dexterous, it "learned with the slowness of a tree growing, as if it had time and patience that he did not have" (25). Andy cursed the awkward left hand and the hook that served as a poor replacement for his right because they "did not cooperate, meeting together in the air, dancing together, as his two hands had done" (25). The right hand that symbolized Andy's power and independence is gone forever. His left hand is the hand of grace that was trying to teach him something about patience, perseverance, and hope, but he would not listen. The metal hook was a constant reminder of his guilt and shame and a focal point for his anger, which began with himself, but extended to everything and everyone he encountered.

It seems fitting that Andy would mourn the loss of his precious hand, which "had been given to him for a helpmeet, to love and to cherish, until he died" (26). He saw his failure to protect his hand as an act of unfaithfulness and the "place of his guilt and shame was like the unknown ocean of the early maps, full of monsters. He knew it was there, but he did not go there" (26). The right hand had made it possible to drive a team

of mules and plough the ground at his farm, one of his favorite aspects of work. It had also joined him to his wife as he “remembered his poise as a two-handed lover, when he reached out to Flora and held and touched her, until the smooths and swells of her ached in his palms and fingers, and his hand knew her as a man knows his homeland” (24). The connections between his hands and his work and wife were very real. The body matters profoundly in all his most intimate connections to the world—his right hand had been “the one with which he reached out to the world and attached himself to it” (23). He realizes that he had taken the gift for granted until he lost it. Because he feels the loss of his right hand so acutely, Andy also loses sight of all the good things in his life that remain. Therein, the loss of his hand leads to a momentous fall.

Andy “remembered with longing the events of his body’s wholeness, grieving over them, as Adam remembered Paradise” (24). The analogy between Andy and Adam’s situation is described in terms of a loss of Paradise—a painful exile made more excruciating by the memory of what has been lost. The Old Testament account in the book of Genesis describes life before the Fall as one in which Adam and Eve and all living things enjoyed harmony and peace. “It was as though his hand still clutched all that was dear to him—and was gone. All the world then became to him a steep slope, and he a man descending, staggering and falling, unable to reach out to tree trunk or branch or root to catch and hold on” (23).

His fall feels continuous. “For months he has merely fallen from one day to another . . . And this fall of his involved or revealed or caused the fall of appearances . . . He no longer believed that anything was what it appeared to be . . . And once his trust had failed there was no limit to his distrust; he saw that the world of his distrust was

bottomless and forever dark, it was his fall itself, but he could not stop it” (28). Andy’s loss of trust in himself and in everything else is at the root of his ceaseless falling away from all that had previously seemed real and substantial. He adopted a Platonism and Gnosticism that undercut the reality and significance of the material world. His intentionality in living evaporates with the evanescence of life as he now perceives it. Andy’s fall is so profound that it seems to bring him all the way down to the dark abyss, the Underworld of modernity.

Andy falls from meaning, community, and hope into the morass of modernity: purposelessness, alienation, and nihilism. Following his injury, he and Flora, “passed the winter alone . . . to each other, he alone to all others. He lay awake to no purpose, as he would have slept to no purpose, angry, sore, and baffled, willing to die if he could have died” (25). Although his wife, his children, his mother, and his friends offer him grace, patience, and love, he “held to his loneliness to protect his absurdity. But it was as though his soul had withdrawn from his life, refusing any longer to live in it” (28). As P. Travis Kroeker indicates, “*Remembering* is a novel that explores embodiment and disembodiment” (123). After attending an academic conference about “The Future of the American Food System” at a Midwestern university where he was invited as the lone dissenting voice against the practices of modern agriculture, Andy flew to San Francisco apparently to just get away.

Andy feels disconnected from himself as well as from all those who had been close to him. Having woken up from a nightmare of desolation in a hotel room in San Francisco, far from his home in Port William, Kentucky, Andy decides to go for a walk—“intent upon his own silence, as though, his presence known to nobody, he is not there

himself" (33). Wandering the streets of San Francisco before dawn, the alienation is palpable between him and the few people who cross his path, those like him "who are alone and heavy laden and without rest" (35). He thinks to himself, "*This is the history of souls. This is the earthly history of immortal souls,*" as he walks "slowly past the deserted entries, the darkened windows" (35). The lonely echoes of the desolate streets reverberate in his heart, which is empty except for "the self-justifications of anger, the self-justifications of self-humiliation, the coddled griefs" (34). The antithesis of the sacramental life is one of self-absorption and self-pity that perceives self and others as shades.

Andy imagines the life he might lead there, in a small apartment on a hillside with a view of the bay where he "would live alone, and slowly he would come to know a peacefulness and gentleness in his own character, having nobody to quarrel with . . . His apartment would be a place of refuge, quiet and orderly, full of beautiful things" (37). He imagined traveling to Japan and meeting "beautiful, indolent, slow-speaking women as solitary and independent as himself, who would not wish to know him well" (37). The dream of embracing the independence of unfettered alienation can only go on so long before "he reminds himself of himself" (38). He recognizes that "the flaw in all that dream is himself, the little hell of himself alone" (38). His dream could reflect someone else's life, but it could not be his, for his has been formed and shaped for community by generations of his forbearers. Passing by a church, he reads the legend engraved across its face: "LA GLORIA DI COLUI CHE TUTTO MUOVE PER L'UNIVERSO PENETRA E RISPLENDE," a line from Canto 1 from Dante's *Paradiso* ("The glory of Him who

moveth everything / Doth penetrate the universe, and shine”) (39). This is the essence of seeing the world sacramentally—seeing the resplendence of the Creator in all of creation.

On a pier overlooking the Pacific Ocean, he finally has reached a point from which he can get almost no farther physically from home in the Continental U.S., and his spatial distance from home corresponds with his sense of spiritual detachment. He has reached the end of land and the end of himself. “Distance comes upon him. Nobody in thousands of miles, nobody who knows him, knows where he is . . . All distance is around him, and he wants nothing that he has. All choice is around him, and he knows nothing that he wants” (42). He is anonymous and unable to think of anything he truly desires. He thinks to himself, “*I’ve come to another of thy limits, Lord. Is this the end?*” (42). The answer comes to him in the voice of his grandmother reciting the first verse of Psalm 130, “*Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord.*” The words “leave him empty, empty as if of very soul” (43). His grandmother, Dorie Catlett, had written those words on the back of a bill for \$3.57 that they still owed the warehouse after the full harvest had been sold many years ago. Psalm 130 begins in a desperate appeal to God from one who feels they are as low as they can go and empty of self as a solution. It is also one of the Psalms of Ascent that the ancient Israelites sang during the journey to Jerusalem for the thrice yearly pilgrimage feasts where they ascended from the lower ground to the Temple Mount. Having reached rock bottom, Andy cries out for God’s help to climb upward again.

Empty of himself and his own thoughts, Andy hears hoof beats and is taken back in time to when his great grandfather, Mat Feltner, began courting his great grandmother in 1868. He considers that those who came after, including him and his children, were

born “into the same place and life” (44). Andy is also drawn back in memory to his grandfather, Marce Catlett, who befriended Elton Penn, a friend of his father, Wheeler, who had moved to the farm next door. In addition, Andy tearfully recalls how he had gone to live with Dorie after Marce died and how much he loved being at the farm with her and placing eggs under the hens to hatch, “doing what had been done forever” (47).

Through these memories:

He is held, though he does not hold. He is caught up again in the old pattern of entrances of minds into minds, minds into place, places into minds. The pattern limits and complicates him, singling him out in his own flesh. Out of the multitude of lives that have surrounded and beckoned to him . . . he returns now to himself . . . He has met again his one life and one death, and he takes them back. (48)

Even when he does not have the strength to hold onto this given life, it cleaves to him like his grandmother Dorie lovingly pulling his head against her. All these relatives and friends who have lived for generations in the same homeland are his and he is theirs. Rather than being a star twinkling alone in the cold cosmos, Andy is content once again to be “a mere meteorite, scorched, small, and fallen” back to earth (48). He is grieving, but filled with joy because the Egypt from which he sought his Exodus has now become his Promised Land once again. He has returned to himself and is almost ready to return home.

His turning toward home begins with another family story that is full of sacramental imagery. Andy recalls that when Mat was nearly grown, his Uncle Jack hired him to help chop out a field of tall corn in a creek bottom on a stiflingly hot day. When



Mat thought he could stand it no longer, Jack said, “Let’s go sink ourselves in the creek” (48). Having hung up their sweaty clothes in the sun to dry, they sank themselves up to their noses into the cool stream of water in a deep and shady part of the creek. As he reflected on it, Mat said, “it made that hard day good. I thought of all the times I’d worked in that field, hurrying to get through, to get to a better place, and it had been there all the time” (48-9). When Mat indicated he had never forgotten what he learned that day, Andy asked him what it was. Mat’s answer was “Redemption” (49). Philip Donnelly notes that “the mention of ‘Egypt’ in *Remembering* helps to make a simple recollection of a refreshing stream on a hot day into a figural baptism narrative” (286). Donnelly argues that “By locating the combined mention of ‘Egypt’ and the story of the ‘little flowing stream’ at the transition of the purgatory stage, Berry follows Dante’s use of Psalm 114 [with its reference to the Lord turning a rock into a pool of water]. In both cases, the allusions to the Exodus story signal a movement toward restoration, toward remembering” (287). Mat learns that the soul-refreshing streams of redemption are there to be found where we are in the present, if we have eyes to see it. This is the lesson that Andy needed to remember.

Baptism symbolizes being united with Christ in his death and resurrection (Colossians 2:12, Romans 6:4), cleansing from sin (Acts 22:16, I Corinthians 6:11), renewal by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5), and initiation into the community of faith (Matthew 28:19, Acts 18:8). Andy is now ready to turn from death to life and back to the membership of Port William. He recognizes his need for forgiveness and the king fisher that Mat sees as he basks in the cool water is reminiscent of the Holy Spirit descending

like a dove on Jesus during his baptism. It seems noteworthy that Andy's point of turning back home occurs over the waters of San Francisco Bay.

There are multiple occasions in *Remembering* when Andy turns to the spring of water on the Harford Place both before and after it becomes his homestead for thirst-quenching, cool water. It is a spring that has never run dry even during the most severe drought, which is reminiscent of Jesus's remark to the Samaritan woman that if she knew who was asking her for a drink of water, she would have asked him for water such that she would never thirst again, but that would become in her a spring of water welling up into everlasting life (John 4:13). As he beholds the Marin Peninsula before preparing to return home, Andy sees that "the whole bay is shining now, the islands, the city on its hills, the wooden houses and the towers, the green treetops, the flashing waves and wings, the glory that moves all things resplendent everywhere" (49). Andy had seen the quote from Dante on the church façade on his way to the pier; now he experiences it for himself in the present. The world has been reenchanted again for him and he sees radiant glory everywhere.

Andy's perception of himself has also changed. When he returns to the hotel room he bathes quickly, shaves, and combs his hair—again reminiscent of baptism. The night before, he could not bear to even look at himself in the mirror. Now as he looks at himself, "it seems to him, for the first time in almost a year," he sees "a smaller, older, plainer man than he was before" (58). Having come back to himself and re-identified himself with the membership of Port William, he can face himself again as he really is.

Andy sees himself "like some old westward migrant, who had reached the edge at last and seen the blue uninterrupted water reaching out around the far side of the world,

had turned in his tracks and started eastward again” (54). To repent is to turn back to a life-giving path. For Andy that means turning back to the membership of Port William.

As Ragen Sutterfield indicates:

Wendell Berry, likewise, uses the language of membership to describe the wholeness that is embodied in a place . . . ‘membership’ is a term that can include the whole of a place—its people, but also its animals and land, its history and future, its town and country. Membership is the name for the belonging we are a part of in the creation . . . The membership is a reality in which our fates are in common because our life is in common. (89-90)

From Berry’s perspective, sacramental living is necessarily communal living. As Hans Gustafson notes, “Berry refers to [Port William] as a ‘membership’ in order to demonstrate the interdependence and necessary belonging of all its citizens” (357).

Within the membership, the lives of the members are intertwined in countless mutually supportive ways. They belong to their place and to one another.

The experience at the pier in San Francisco is not the first time that Andy has determined to return home. Based in Chicago as an agricultural journalist for *Scientific Farming* magazine, Andy was sent out to interview a farmer in Ohio, Bill Meikelberger, who was considered to be the epitome of success in modern agriculture. What Andy finds is a man with an ulcer, insomnia, much stress, a mound of debt that he is certain will always be part of his life, the absence of neighbors, an empty home, a large monoculture of corn taking up virtually all 2,000 acres of his land, no respect for his ancestors or their methods, and just enough time to have dinner in town with his wife who works there. Andy struggles to see this as a true vision of success.

While driving to Pittsburgh for another assignment, he sees an Amish farmer plowing his field with horses and stops to observe, recalling the memory of plowing with mules and horses as a child back home in Kentucky. Andy and the Amish farmer, Isaac Troyer, strike up a conversation and Isaac invites Andy to make a couple of passes with the team and plow. “As he drove the long curve of the plowland, watching the dark furrow open and turn, shining and fresh-smelling, beneath him, Andy could feel the tilth of the ground all through his body. The gait of the team was steady and powerful, the three mares worked well together, and he could feel in his hands their readiness in their work” (65). Since the plowing is not mechanized and there is no air conditioned tractor cab to sit in, Andy hears the birds singing in the woods along the creek and wonders how long it has been since Meikelberger heard birds sing and then notes that the only birds likely to be found on his property were English sparrows that lived off the wasted grain. Andy learns that Isaac has no debt, has money saved, seems happy and healthy, values having neighbors to love more than additional land to buy, has a beautiful, well-maintained farmstead, and is closely engaged with his wife and children in the work and life of the farm.

The contrast between Meikelberger and Isaac’s way of farming and life could not be more stark. Modern agribusiness focuses on efficiency in the present, but gives little thought to health in the short-term or for future generations and the Earth. In his essay, “The Body and the Earth,” Berry states the issue as follows: “The ‘drudgery’ of growing one’s own food, then, is not drudgery at all . . . It is—in addition to being the appropriate fulfillment of a practical need—a sacrament, as eating is also, by which we enact and understand our oneness with the Creation, the conviviality of one body with all bodies”

(*Art of the Commonplace* 132-3) Working well, whether in agriculture or any other endeavor, is a sacred duty and joy, an enactment of that which is both deeply personal and communal for it should be intensely satisfying, meet our needs, and do good to other humans and other creatures on the planet.

Berry indicates that “We are working well when we use ourselves as the fellow creatures of the plants, animals, materials, and other people we are working with. Such work is unifying, healing. It brings us home from pride and despair, and places us responsibly within the human estate. It defines us as we are: not too good to work with our bodies, but too good to work poorly or joylessly or selfishly or alone” (134). Good work resists the abstraction that seeks to reduce everything to monetary value and its handmaiden, efficiency. Berry’s use of the word conviviality is important. The Oxford English Dictionary on-line notes that the origin comes from the Latin *convialis*, from *convivium* ‘a feast,’ and from *con-* ‘with’ + *vivere* ‘live.’ The way we work and live with other people, animals, plants, and things should seek to produce a collective and shared joy in living. As he considered Issac’s farmstead, Andy thought “It was a pretty place, its prettiness not so much made as allowed. It was a place of work, but a place too of order and rest, where work was done in a condition of acknowledged blessedness and of gratitude” (68). To work sacramentally is to receive the world gratefully as blessed gift, work with it to the best of our ability, and give it back for the betterment of all. A principal fruit of one’s labor is food.

In a quote above, Berry notes that eating is also a sacrament. Isaac invites Andy to have a meal with him and his family—his wife, Anna, and their two youngest children, Susan and Caleb. “He bowed his head with them over the food at the kitchen table. It was

a clear, clean room. The food was good. A large maple tree stood near the back porch, visible from the kitchen windows . . . As they ate, they talked, making themselves known to each other” (68). Although Isaac described the food as plain, Andy experiences the food and all that accompanies it as good. This is the simple feasting where bodies and souls are nourished together after a good day’s work with healthy nutrition and conversation. As he considered how the entire place where Isaac lived was a home, Andy reflected: “It was home to many lives, tame and wild, of which Isaac’s was only one, and was so meant. There was something—Andy was trying for words—something cordial or congenial or convivial about it. Whatever it was, it said that a man could live with trees and animals and a bending little tree-lined stream; he could live with neighbors” (67). Again, the word convivial seems to best capture a place where all life together is intentionally nourished and celebrated.

Berry’s sacramental view of eating is captured well in his essay “The Pleasures of Eating”: “Eating with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance—is perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and power we cannot comprehend” (*What are People For?* 152). That which seems most ordinary and basic has within it a tremendous power to transform our relationship to the Earth and other people when received with humility, gratitude, and delight. Though we might be able to scientifically describe how the life of dead plants and dead animals becomes life in us, there yet remains much mystery for those with eyes to see it by faith. Berry closes his essay with a couple of stanzas from William Carlos Williams’s poem, “The Host,”: “There is nothing

to eat, / seek it where you will, / but the body of the Lord. / The blessed plants / and the sea, yield it / to the imagination / intact” (152). Jesus said, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst” (John 6:35). It seems fitting that one of the sacraments Jesus gave to his church involves a meal of bread and wine where the participants feed on him by faith. Williams’s poem implies that we are always feeding on him when we eat whether we recognize it or not. Thus, the word Eucharist (thanksgiving) seems particularly appropriate. Andy’s grievance seemed to obscure the grace for a time, but it was always there waiting to be received when the hand of gratitude was restored.

As he took the flight home from San Francisco on his way back to his home in Kentucky, Andy remembers another simple meal where he first received a vision of what his own, future farmstead might be like. Andy and his older friend, Elton Penn, were eating sandwiches in the shade by the spring at the Harford Place when Elton said, “Listen . . . do you see what this old place is? The right man could do something here. It’s been worked half to death and mistreated every way, but there’s good in it yet” (90-1). Andy knew that Elton had been studying the place all morning, thinking of what it could become. Although Elton knows he will not do the makeover himself, he wants somebody to do it and thinks Andy might be just the one. “Listen, Andy . . . if you could find the right girl, a little smarter than you, and willing to work, and take care of things, here’s where you could get started and amount to something. Put some sheep here. A few cows. I’d help you, and the rest of them would, we’d neighbor with each other and get along” (91). So Andy held the old place in mind until the visit with Isaac and his family

prompted him to take action and buy it. By then, he had already found the right woman to share the vision of what it could be and to begin to make it a reality.

Andy and Flora lived happily together at the Harford Place for several years before Andy's accident changed everything and incessant quarreling became the norm. Before the accident, "their quarrels . . . were about duality. They were two longing to be one, or one dividing relentlessly into two" (28). Before the accident, the quarrels ultimately were a way for them to work through their differences toward oneness.

It was as though grace and peace were bestowed on them out of the sanctity of marriage itself, which simply furnished them to on another, free and sufficient as rain to leaf. It was as if they were not making marriage but being made by it, and, while it held them, time and their lives flowed over them, like swift water over stones, rubbing them together, grinding off their edges, making them fit together, fit to be together, in the only way that fragments can be rejoined. And though Andy did not understand this, and though he suffered from it, he trusted and rejoiced in it. (29)

Marriage is the process of two people committing themselves to being and becoming one. As the waters of life flowed over them, they were like the stones in the creek on the old Harford Place, continually rubbing together, gradually losing the sharp edges, and fitting together better and better over time. Apart, they were fragments that needed to be rejoined by laying side by side. The process was hard and painful at times, but before the accident, Andy could see that marriage was both sanctified and sanctifying—a source of grace, peace, and wholeness. The accident led to a loss of the foundation of marriage, trust.



Andy's loss of trust spreads out from himself and envelopes everything else in his marriage and life. "He had no faith in himself, and he had no faith in her faith in him, or in his faith in her. Now their quarrels did not end their difference and bring them together, but were all one quarrel that had no end . . . It was no longer about duality, but about division, an infinite cold space that opened between them" (29). Without trust in himself, he could not trust Flora or their marriage. The result was division and alienation that could not be bridged in the absence of trust. "He did not trust her to love him. He did not trust himself to trust her to love him" and so he tells her "You don't love me" (29). The only suitable reply she could think of was to throw a wet dish rag in his face. Flora knows that Andy will never be able to receive her love until he receives forgiveness from himself and from those he has hurt in his anger.

In "The Body and the Earth," Berry notes that "The sacrament of sexual union . . . has now become a kind of marketplace in which husband and wife represent each other as sexual property. Competitiveness and jealousy, imperfectly sweetened and disguised by the illusions of courtship, now become governing principles, and they work to isolate the couple inside their marriage" (*Art of the Commonplace* 113). Though he comes from a Protestant Christian background, Berry views marriage sacramentally and communally, not as a private relationship. As he indicates, "The marriage vow unites not just a woman and a man with each other; it unites each of them with the community in a vow of sexual responsibility toward all others. The whole community is married, realizes its essential unity, in each of its marriages" (*Art of the Commonplace* 117). For Berry, even that which many consider most personal and private is fraught with communal significance. For the "forsaking of all others is a keeping of faith, not just with the chosen one, but

with the ones forsaken” (117). To view fidelity as a dour duty to be enforced by sheer willpower is a perversion (115). Fidelity has practical benefits for the marriage and for the community in which it resides. Uncontrolled and unbounded energy in any form, sexual or otherwise, is not good for individuals, marriages, or the community. During his travels away from home, Andy is enticed by the beautiful women he sees in the airport and his fidelity is tested.

Although Andy had determined to go home and to be reconciled to his wife and his community again, he is still subject to temptation. He acutely feels the challenge to fidelity:

A man to the love of women born, no specialist, he feels his mind tugged this way and that by lovely women. They seem to be everywhere, beautiful women in summer dresses beautifully worn, flesh suggesting itself, as they move, in sweet pressures, against cloth. He lets them disembody him . . . What pain of loneliness draws him to them! As though ghostly arms reach out of his body towards them, he yearns for some lost, unreachable communion . . . Loving them apart from anything that he knows, or might know, he is disembodied by them . . . He hears their music, each a siren on her isle . . . They did not sing to him. (77-8)

Like Odysseus, Andy is homeward bound, but faces many temptations along the way. The airport is a confluence of strangers, the antithesis of community, bound together by no common place or relationships. All who enter there through the “Gate of Universal Suspicion” “must submit to the minimization and the diaspora of total strangeness and universal suspicion” (77). Since he does not know the women, he can only be attracted by their bodies. Ironically, this yearning for them in this way leads to his own

disembodiment into imaginative fantasies where he desires communion apart from relationship in place and community—something that is ultimately unreachable.

Odysseus had his men tie him to the mast of their ship so the sirens' beautiful songs would not lead to enchantment and shipwreck. Andy remembers and longs for the cords of another communal ritual that joined male and female bodies in healthy community.

Andy recalls the ring dances that his own people once danced from generation to generation. “He has heard the tread of his own people dancing in a ring, the fiddle measuring time to them, voice calling them, through the steps of change and absence, home again, the dancers unaware of their steps, which only the music, older than memory, remembered. Now that dance is broken, dismembered in the Land of Universal Suspicion” (78). The old ring dances were an important ritual means for bonding the community together. As Walter J. Freeman III indicates in “A Neurobiological Role of Music in Social Bonding”:

Dance on a stage appeals to the eye, but its real charm is found by the participants who shape their movements into a living and evolving unity. The strongest basis for cooperation lies in rhythmically repeated motions, because they are predictable by others, and others can thereby anticipate and move in accord with their expectations. Music gives the background beat . . . [Communal dancing] constructs the sense of trust and predictability in each member of the community on which social interactions are based. (420)

Communal dancing is a powerful builder of communities because it leads to mutual trust and social bonding in ways that transcend the merely rational.

Andy realizes the old wisdom of having ways for men and women, girls and boys of all ages to interact in a way that is social and builds community. He thinks to himself, “*And where is the dance that would gather them up again in the immortal ring, the many-in-one?*” The answer to the siren’s song is the ring dance caller. Berry laments the loss, noting that “The energy that is most convivial and unifying loses its communal forms and becomes divisive” (*Art of the Commonplace* 113) as ring dancing gave way to ballroom dancing by individual couples or more modern dances where “each one of the dancers moves alone” (*Art of the Commonplace* 113). The loss of the ritual of ring dancing represents the triumph of individualistic versus communal forms of living.

In the anonymity and absence of trust of the airport, “It seems to him that he is one among the living dead, their eyes fixed and lightless, their bodies graves, doomed to hurry forever through the abstraction of the unsensed nowhere of their mutual disregard, dead to one another” (78). Like Odysseus, Andy has entered “the world of death and darkness” (Homer 254) on his journey home and those he encounters are like shades. He fears the consequences of what is happening to his own soul and that of the whole world. In his heart, he cries out, “*Where now is the great good land? Where now the house under the white oak? Oh, cut off, cut off?*” (79). Like Odysseus, Andy longs to return home. The delights of Calypso’s cave and her promise of immortality if he would stay with her were not enough for Odysseus to forsake his wife Penelope and his homeland of Ithaca. Andy begins to trust again that real life for him lies at home with his wife and children and the membership of Port William.

During the flight home, Andy looks down from the airplane upon the Earth and thinking of the harm that he knows is being done to it, he begins a mental liturgy

beginning with: “*Spare us, O Lord, the logical consequence of our folly*” (85) followed by “*Spare us, O Lord, the logical consequences of our ingratitude*” and “*Remember not, Lord, our offences, nor the offences of our forefathers*” (87) Although Andy’s apparent fear of flying may make his prayers seem somewhat comical, the prayers also seem like a genuine desire for forgiveness and mercy, the very thing that Flora told him he needed. On the flight and the drive home from the airport, Andy fears that he will die before he can ask for that forgiveness from Flora. When he arrives home and sees Flora’s note indicating that she and the children have gone to a friend’s to pick beans, thoughts of his mortality make him determined not to take any chances and below her note, he writes: “Yes. I’m better now. Can you forgive me? I pray that you will forgive me” (99).

Although penance is not considered a sacrament in Protestant forms of Christianity, forgiveness is so central to the Christian life that when Jesus taught his disciples to pray, he included: “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). Andy recognizes his need for forgiveness from God and from Flora in order to be relationally restored.

In addition to forgiveness, trust was required for Andy’s restoration. As the plane flies toward home, Andy reflected that to make the Harford Place a home required the right woman and “it required trust. He sees it now. What he and Flora have made of the Harford Place has depended on trust. They have not made it what it might be . . . but they have made it more than it was when they came to it. In twelve years they have given it a use and a life; a beauty has come to it that is its answer to their love for it and their work; and it has given them a life that belonged to them even before they knew they wanted it. And all has depended on trust” (91). The making of their homestead on the farm at the

Harford Place was a sacrament of trust. They gave the place there love and work and it responded by giving them back the life they desired, but that they could have not fully imagined until it became a reality. Andy realized that “His life has never rested on anything he has known beforehand—none of it. He chose it before he knew it, and again afterwards. And then he failed his trust and his choice, and now has chosen again, again on trust . . . To trust is simply to give oneself; the giving is for the future, for which there is no evidence. And once given, the self cannot be taken back” (91-2). The only sure thing about trust is the irrevocable giving of the self to others. The outcome of that giving cannot be guaranteed or fully foreseen beforehand, but works itself out in time like a farmer sowing seed in hope of a crop to come.

Once again, Andy is ready to give his life in trust to his wife, his children, the family farm, and the membership of Port William. Marriage and work and the sacramental nature of living all converge and become possible in this giving. After reciting the words of the penitential Psalm 51 near the end of his reverie, Andy sees Flora as a bride dressed all in white, smiling, “a gift to him such as he did not know, such as would not be known until the death that they would promise to meet together had been met, and so perhaps never to be known in this world” and “Thanks, as if not his own, showers down upon him” (94). Now and perhaps as never before, Andy is able to receive his wife as a gracious and mysterious gift that it will take all of their life together to unwrap and enjoy. She had given herself to him in trust. Commenting on Andy’s remembering of Flora’s giving of herself to him at their wedding, Kroeker indicates “this nuptial event upon which households are founded in self-giving trust that also makes possible the shalom of living communities is above all a sacramental act” (133). Andy’s

memory of Flora's gift of herself to him in complete trust makes him ready to give himself back to her in faith and fidelity again. Yet, one more epiphany awaits.

Having arrived at home and read Flora's note, Andy begins walking around the house. "He feels around him a blessedness that he had lived in, in his anger, and did not know" (98). As he walked from room to room, he breathed in "the smell of the life the two of them have made, and that she has kept" and he keeps saying over and over to himself, "I am blessed. I am blessed" (98-9). He goes out into the quiet evening and lays down at the foot of a large oak tree to rest, and sleep overtakes him. His sleep is not restful for he "experiences a hopeless longing for something he does not know, for which he does not even know a name" (100). Now he realizes that he is nothing, but "somewhere there is a lovely something, infinitely desirable, of which he cannot recall even the name" (100). He feels a touch on his shoulder and "his form shivers and forks out into darkness, and is shaped again in sense. Breath and light come into him. He feels his flesh enter into his mind, mind into flesh. He turns, puts his knee under him, stands, and though dark to himself, is whole" (100). This scene seems to recall God's creation of Adam from the dust of the ground in Genesis 2:7 by breathing life into his nostrils. Andy seems to have undergone a re-birth of sorts.

When he awakes, Andy is still on the hillside under an oak, but the place is changed. It is just before dawn and it is springtime for the dry stream has begun to flow. Flowers are in bloom and birdsong is everywhere. He sees a man "dark as shadow" and begins to follow him up the hill road. He recognizes that this is one the one who looked at him face-to-face and awoke him with his touch. As it continues to grow lighter Andy experiences an epiphany:

Andy hears a more distant singing, whether of voices or instruments, sounds or words, he cannot tell. It is at first faint, and then stronger, filling the sky and touching the ground, and the birds answer it. He understands presently that he is hearing the light; he is hearing the sun, which now has risen, though from the valley is not yet visible. The light's music resounds and shines in the air and over the countryside, drawing everything into the infinite, sensed but mysterious pattern of its harmony. From every tree and leaf, grass blade, stone, bird, and beast, it is answered and again answers. The creatures sing back their names. But more than their names. They sing their being. The world sings. The sky sings back. It is one song, the song of many members of one love, the whole song sung and to be sung, resounding, in each of its moments. And it is light. (101)

The sun is the cantor and the whole of creation sings with joy in response. Nothing in creation is silent and their song breathes out one shared love. Each has its own unique voice, but they all harmonize in beautiful music. Andy has a vision of the end of time and the Earth's new eternal beginning.

Yet he also sees "people of such beauty that he weeps to see them. He sees that these are the membership of one another and of the place and of the song or light in which they live and move" (102). These beautiful ones "are the dead, and they are alive" (102), they are the fulfillment of the promised resurrection of embodied souls. Andy sees that "he lives in eternity as he lives in time, and nothing is lost. Among the people of that town, he sees men and women he remembers, and men and women remembered in memories he remembers" (102). He had sensed before that they were with him in that place even after they had died, but now he sees the confluence of eternity and time. His



dark guide signals that he cannot go to them. Even though he is grieved to leave them, he also wants to leave so that he can “go with his help, such as it is, and offer it” (102).

Andy is ready to return to the living who have not passed into eternity yet and he desires to offer them all he is and is not. As he prepares to leave the beautiful ones, he salutes them by “lift[ing] toward them the restored right hand of his joy” (103). He seems to know that it is only a goodbye and farewell until they will meet again, for they will always be members one of another and time and eternity cannot separate them.

With reference to this scene, Gustafson indicates: “It is an experience that resonates with the overall context of Berry’s pansacramental spirituality” (359); his belief that life is full of people, places, things, ideas, and experiences that “represent the real presence of the divine (God) in the world” (346). For Berry, it seems that two or seven sacraments could never be enough because his “broad view of sacraments allows for an infinite number of potential sacraments” (346). As Berry indicated in an interview, “Imagination permits us to see the immanence of the spirit and breath of God in creation” (Bush 229). Andy recovers just such an imagination that “permits us to perceive in the largest possible terms the reality of a thing . . . to see that the life of anything that lives is a miracle” (229). Against the reductionism and disenchantment that is so prevalent in modernity, Berry argues that matter is loaded with meaning and connections that require a poetic and sacramental imagination to even begin to see. A failure to view the world sacramentally has tremendous practical implications and Berry’s “prophetic cultural criticism is rooted in a sacramental imagination” (Kroeker 120). Economics, the environment, the household, and all of life are vitally connected and can only be healthy when viewed and treated sacramentally.

In his essay, “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” Berry notes that “We are all holy creatures living among other holy creatures in a world that is holy” (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 99). To live life sacramentally is to understand this and to act, think, and feel accordingly. In one of his poems, Berry puts it another way: “There are no unsacred places; / there are only sacred places / and desecrated places” (*Given Poems* 18). One cannot make what is holy, unholy, but one can treat holy things with disregard and disrespect and ruin them. Elsewhere, in “Christianity and the Survival of Creation,” Berry argues that “It is clearly impossible to assign holiness exclusively to the built church without denying holiness to the rest of Creation, which is then said to be ‘secular.’ The world, which God looked at and found entirely good, we find none too good to pollute entirely and destroy piecemeal” (*Sex, Economy, Freedom & Community* 103). If we label most of the creation as secular and narrowly construe what is holy, it makes it very easy to abuse that which God gives as good gifts to be received with gratitude, respect, and mindful care.

A perception of the immanence of God in the world leads to a far different conclusion and motivation for how humankind should treat the Earth. In his essay, “A Secular Pilgrimage,” Berry outlines the difference as follows:

If God was not in the world, then obviously the world was a thing of inferior importance, or of no importance at all. Those who were disposed to exploit it were thus free to do so . . . a man could aspire to heaven with his mind and his heart while destroying the earth, and his fellow men, with his hands.

How should a man live in this world? Institutional Christianity has usually tended to give a non-answer to this question: He should live for the next world.

Which completely ignores the *fact* that the here is antecedent to the hereafter . . .

Some varieties of Christianity have held that one should despise the things of this world—which made it all but mandatory that they should be neglected as well. In that way men of conscience—or men who might reasonably have been expected to be men of conscience—have been led to abandon the world, and their own posterity, to the exploiters and ruiners” (*A Continuous Harmony* 7).

This dualism between the sacred and the secular has had a baleful influence from Plato to early Christianity to Descartes to the present day.

Its power and influence are pervasive in Western Culture as Berry explicates elsewhere. According to Kroecker, “abstracting dualisms . . . may be effectively and affectively countered only by the conscious cultivation of a loving imagination held together by an ‘attention’ and ‘attunement’ to the mysterious spiritual-material integrity of creation. This loving imagination is cultivated by the human soul, but never in isolation from the body” (124). The body-soul dualism is so ubiquitous in modern society in both religious and secular worldviews that recognition of the problem, as in Andy’s case, is the first step toward healing. Like one of Berry’s other Port William character’s, Burley Coulter, it is important to cultivate a ‘knack for the Here’ more than a ‘knack for the Hereafter’ (Berry, *Place on Earth* 104); to seek to be present to and to lovingly know and appreciate the uniqueness of the people and place that are our own.

When Andy lost his right hand, his mother told him, “you must accept this as given to you to learn from, or it will hurt you worse than it already has” (27). At the time, Andy could not understand what she meant. With the loss of his right hand, Andy lost his grip on the world and everything that was dear to him. Sucked down into the maelstrom

of modernity, he fell from community to alienation, from purpose to meaninglessness, and from hope to nihilism. He descends to great depths and experiences a pilgrimage of pain and exile before he cried out to the Lord for deliverance and began his journey home. To be restored, Andy had to move from seeing the world as a grievance to constantly begrudge to beholding it as gift of grace to receive with the utmost gratitude. Andy slowly regains his sacramental imagination by remembering who he is—not an isolated individual on an island of ignominy, but a vital part of a membership that stretches beyond his knowing, one that had chosen him and that he has chosen multiple times.

Multigenerational memories of working, eating, marriage, refreshing streams, and the building of a homestead, all help Andy remember who he is and to trust in the life he has chosen. By the end of *Remembering*, Andy has become not a new man, but a resurrected Andy who is able to reconnect to his body, his wife, his community (those living and dead), the Earth, and God. Though he had lost his right hand, he ultimately found greater hope and joy and was ready to give himself away as a gift of love in response to all the blessings he had received. With his sacramental imagination restored, Andy is re-membered by his remembering—reunited with his membership and himself; more whole than he had ever been before and holding firm to his given life with the right hand of trust.

## Chapter 10

### Conclusion

Given the basic premise of this thesis, it seems fitting that the penultimate chapter focuses on a protagonist who loses and then recovers his sacramental imagination. Andy Catlett's falling away from a sacramental way of seeing the world is a microcosm of what happened to humanity in the West. As Principe summarizes the situation: "early moderns saw – in various ways – a cosmically interconnected world, where everything, human beings and God and all branches of knowledge, were inextricably linked parts of a whole . . . early modern thinkers, like their medieval forebears, looked out on a world of connections and a world full of purpose and meaning as well as mystery, wonder, and promise" (37-8). This is an excellent summary of the way the sacramental imagination perceives the world: in opposition to alienation and fragmentation there are connections everywhere and to everything; in contrast to disenchantment there is wonder and mystery; and against nihilism there is purpose and meaning. When one reads much of modern literature, it is easy to agree with Sigmund Freud's assertion in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that "Life, as we find it, is too hard for us; it brings us too many pains, disappointments and impossible tasks" (41). Feeling alone and estranged from God, other human beings, and the world, it seems reasonable to pursue powerful deflections, substitutive satisfactions, and intoxicating substances (Freud 41).

In *Understanding the Present: Science and the Soul of Modern Man*, Bryan Appleyard summarized the human condition in Freudian terms as follows: "Man, in Freud's summary, was alienated from the universe, nature and himself" (101). How does one cope with the bleakness of modernity and post-modernity? In *The Sacred Cosmos*,

Terence Nichols notes that the “superficiality of much of contemporary belief in God is reflected in consumerism and a hedonistic lifestyle—the ‘live for today, live to have fun, live for distraction and entertainment’ attitude. But another indication is the widespread depression and pessimism characteristic of Europe and increasingly of America” (221). Nichols contrasts this modern mindset with that of Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) who wrote his *Canterbury Tales* only about fifty years after the Black Death had ravaged Europe with a loss of about one-third of the population. As Nichols indicates, “Chaucer’s tales, though ribald and bawdy, are full of a *joie de vivre* and an optimism that is rare in modern film or fiction. Behind Chaucer’s pageant is the sense that, in the end, ‘all will be well’” with an optimism that came from his Christian faith

(221). Earthiness and spirituality are co-existent in Chaucer’s medieval worldview. In light of the hope of redemption, human foibles and failings can be seen humorously.

Of course, sacramentality can also go astray when matter as a means of grace is seen to operate merely magically. Chaucer’s “The Pardoner’s Tale” shows how easy it was for medieval Christianity to depart from a truly sacramental imagination to one that abuses what was meant to dispense grace as a means of greedy gain. Through humor, Chaucer points out the problems of common practices like indulgences and veneration of relics in undermining the very grace they were intended to convey. With honesty, the Pardoner in his prologue notes that “I preach for nothing but for greed of gain / And use the same old text, as bold as brass, / *Radix malorum est cupiditas* [greed is the root of evil]. / And thus I preach against the very vice / I make my living out of – avarice.” (243). Ironically, the Pardoner preaches a message and tells a tale about greed as the root of all evil as a means to satisfy his own avaricious desires. He really does not care a whit about

God's grace as he declares: "For my exclusive purpose is to win / And not at all to castigate their sin. / Once dead what matter how their souls may fare? / They can go blackberrying, for all I care!" (243). Greed obliterated true grace in the Pardoner's heart. A real life Dominican preacher and seller of indulgences, Johann Tetzel, was repudiated to have used the phrase: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, The soul from purgatory springs" (Bainton 60). This was too much for Martin Luther who as a Catholic monk called for a debate on such abuses in his *Ninety-five Theses*, which ultimately touched off the Protestant Reformation.

As is so often the case with religious reformations, it is very easy to overcorrect when seeking to address errors. Misuse of sacramental means of grace led to a weakening of the sacramental imagination. The Book of Nature became less important than the Bible as the book of God's revelation. This shift among Protestants led to a greater emphasis on rational ways of knowing over against embodied and poetic ways of apprehending truth. As previously noted, the emphasis shifted to such a degree that Karl Barth argued that preaching had become the Protestant sacrament. With underlying suspicions about bodily, sensual, and emotional acts that might detract from rational ways of apprehending God's truth, it became all too easy for worship in many Protestant sects to be framed as though people were just "brains on a stick" to borrow James K. A. Smith's idiom. Although the way various Protestant sects perceived the sacraments varied considerably, those who followed Ulrich Zwingli's (1484-1531) influence saw them more as symbols than as means of participating in God's real presence. Ultimately, the Roman Catholic Church recognized the need for some changes and launched the Counter Reformation following the Council of Trent (1545-1563). However, the theological and political

fissures were too great to close and the unity of the Church in the West remains torn asunder along with the sacramental tapestry.

Prior to the Reformation, William of Ockham (c. 1285-1347) undercut the sacramental view of nature by using his philosophical razor to sever the notion that the being of creatures was tied to the being of God. Nichols argues that “the three movements that most shaped the modern worldview, science, Protestantism, and individualism, all flowed from Ockhamism” (40). While not neglecting the sacraments completely, the Reformers like Luther and Calvin centered their theology on the preaching of the Bible, whereas Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians centered on the sacraments (Nichols 40). Though repudiated by early Church councils, Gnosticism continued to have a profound influence with its elevation of the spiritual above the material and the corresponding dualities separating God from nature, and therefore giving birth to the sacred/secular distinction. Rather than mediating the actual presence of God, the sacraments were degraded to mere symbols that further emphasized the rational aspects of religion above the body as essential to participation in divine realities.

Christian spirituality never guaranteed a sacramental apprehension of the world. Almost from its inception, Christianity in the West has suffered from a deep ambivalence about the body, in particular, and the material world, in general. Nichols summarizes the situation as follows: “Early Christian authors displayed two very different attitudes toward nature. One, under influence of neo-Platonism, was a world-denying and nature-denying tendency, which saw nature and body as hindrances to ascent toward God; the other was a tendency to see nature as the manifestation of God’s glory” (29). As Nichols points out, some, like Augustine, represent both tendencies. The tensions within



Christianity regarding the body have been evident. Radical forms of contempt for the body (e.g., extreme asceticism) and for nature was characteristic of theologians such as Origen. Conversely, seeing “the whole creation as a kind of sacrament reflecting God” reflected the thinking of Christians like St. Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1226) and St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Berry points out the incongruity between body affirming Christian doctrines like the creation; the incarnation, resurrection, and bodily ascension of Christ; and the eschatological promises of believers enjoying a new heavens and a new earth with resurrected bodies and body-denying tendencies within Christianity.

The natural philosophers of the early modern period who paved the way for modern science believed that God reveals Himself both through the Book of Nature and the Book of Scripture. This was a principal motivator for their investigations of the natural world. As Principe indicates “virtually everyone in Europe, certainly every scientific thinker mentioned in this book [about the Scientific Revolution], was a believing and practicing Christian. The notion that scientific study, modern or otherwise, requires an atheistic – or what is euphemistically called a ‘sceptical’ – viewpoint is a 20<sup>th</sup>-century myth proposed by those who wish science itself to be a religion” (36). Principe’s is the now the prevailing view of historians of science. In *A Short History of Scientific Thought*, John Henry indicates that “The historical fact remains, however, that the uninterrupted development of Western science would almost certainly not have been possible if it hadn’t been recognized by leading medieval thinkers (all of whom were theologians) as an essential concomitant of Christian theology” (50). Yet, despite the debt it owes to the Christian natural philosophers of the early modern period, modern science

also tore at the sacramental tapestry with gusto by asserting its exclusivity as a means of obtaining objective knowledge.

Scientism, the belief that science is or can be the only true and complete explanation (Appleyard 2), is the hallmark of modern science that has usurped other means of knowing. As Appleyard notes, “Scientists who insist that they are telling us how the world incontrovertibly is are asking for our faith in their subjective certainty of their own objectivity” (54). The general assertion of scientific objectivity has demeaned other means of knowing. This is problematic on a number of levels. First of all, science is not able to answer the questions that humans care most about—questions of meaning, purpose, and values. Secondly, the Cartesian mechanical philosophy ultimately led to the assertion that matter and motion are all there is. If God is acknowledged at all, He is seen as being relegated to a position of inactive observer. Thirdly, the triumphalism of modern science diminished the significance of other means of knowing, which are more closely aligned with where humans find meaning and purpose like religion, philosophy, narrative, poesis, and art. Lastly, science has emphasized the division of knowledge rather than its integration. As William Wordsworth indicates in his poem, “The Tables Turned,” “Sweet is the lore, which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous form of things:-- / We murder to dissect.” For the most part, the Academy has championed knowing a great deal about some narrow aspect of knowledge rather than integration of knowledge across disciplines.

The Cartesian mechanical philosophy and Baconian empiricism initially led to great optimism as scientific and technological discoveries seemed to promise so much in alleviating the ills of humankind. Yet, the same science and technology that could

provide better living through chemistry and physics, for example, was also the source of poison gas and atomic bombs. While often accepted in godlike fashion,<sup>109</sup> technology typically is a double-edged sword, which brings with it both blessings and curses with no ethical framework to limit its freedom. Appleyard decries “the dark, pessimistic side of the modern world which has defined so much of the twentieth century imagination. For ours has been the exhausted, disillusioned phase of the Cartesian universe after the initial optimism inspired by scientific and technological triumph had ebbed” (51). The modern scientific and secular-based imagination is often characterized by pessimism and disillusionment. In his poem “Dover Beach,” Matthew Arnold laments the ebbing tide of the “Sea of Faith,” which leaves behind a world that “Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; / And we are here as on a darkling plain.” For all their pomposity and achievements, scientific materialism and Enlightenment rationalism have left humankind disenchanted on the darkling plain of modernity.

The deep dualisms inherent in modernity and post-modernity in the West did not only affect religion, education, and science. Humankind’s relationship to the Earth was also deeply impacted. In *For the Beauty of the Earth*, Steven Bouma-Prediger cites the following quote from *Sierra*, the official publication of the Sierra Club: “Having created God in man’s own image, Western religion has adopted an anthropocentric mythology that separates God from Creation, soul from body, and man from Earth. It is this dualism

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<sup>109</sup> Neil Postman’s *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* provides a very insightful cultural critique of impacts of technology on our society. He argues that: “The thrust of a century of scholarship had the effect of making us lose confidence in our belief systems and therefore in ourselves. Amid the conceptual debris, there remained one sure thing to believe in—technology” (55). He goes on to note that “We have devalued the singular human capacity to see things whole in all their psychic, emotional and moral dimensions, and we have replaced this with faith in the powers of technical calculation” (118).

that prevents us from relating not only to the natural world, but to ourselves” (57-8).

Separated from a vital connection to God and His creation, matter loses its connection to meaning. The nihilism of modernity leads to a will to power over nature that is aided and abetted by gnostic forms of Christianity accompanied by dominion theology. The metaphor for the world in mechanistic philosophy is the machine and there is no living thing that is not reduced to meaningless matter in motion. By emphasizing biblical verses that emphasize humankind’s dominion over the Earth while forgetting other passages that emphasize the responsibility of stewardship and benevolent rule that comes with it, Christians have often been just as complicit in despoiling the Earth.

If the spiritual is elevated above the material, if the body and the Earth are seen as prison houses for the soul, if nature has no intrinsic value apart from supplying human needs and desires, if the world has no sacramental significance, and if humans have no real connection or responsibility to the place they live or people that will live there in the future, then it is easy to see how Christians could participate in the despoiling of the world and champion unbounded consumerism with as much or more gusto than any nihilist. Of course, these are all big ifs, which I argue are unbiblical.

Professor Norman Wirzba has focused his research on the intersection between theology, philosophy, ecology, environmental studies, and agrarianism. Bouma-Prediger summarizes Wirzba’s explanation of five factors leading to culture as the denial of creation in *The Paradise of God*: 1) “creation was no longer seen as the all-encompassing reality that united God, humanity, and the earth;” 2) the transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society with an accompanying high degree of mobility has led to a loss of people’s sense of vital connection with the Earth and a particular place on it to know,

appreciate, and care for; 3) modern technology has contributed to disenchantment with a desire to control and master nature and an engagement with the world that is mediated by technological media; 4) scorning of the “interdependencies that are necessary for the flourishing of life;” and 5) a sense of the growing irrelevance of God, including a practical atheism among those who declare belief (75-6).

In addition, Bouma-Prediger also refers to Wesley Granburg-Michaelson’s five-fold assessment of environmental crisis as a result of the cultural captivity of Christianity in the West: 1) “the church is captive to the modern Western culture,” including the view that the natural world is essentially a repository of resources for human exploitation and becomes subservient to the gods of consumption and wealth; 2) acceptance of the anthropocentrism of modernity that “enthroned ourselves as the center of things;” 3) the making of technology into a god in Western culture; 4) a forgetfulness of the cosmic scope of God’s work with a narrow focus on redemption of souls; and 5) the hubris of the Western world that will not learn more earth-friendly ways from other traditions<sup>110</sup> while pledging allegiance to the “false gods of scientism, technicism, and materialism, among others” (77-80). It is on this darkling plain of modernity with its shadows of alienation, nihilism, and environmental rapine that Joyce, O’Connor, and Berry sequentially appear as poet-prophets to try to reawaken Western culture and to call their readers back to a sacramental imagination.

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<sup>110</sup> Bouma-Prediger notes that the Eastern Orthodox tradition “has theological and liturgical riches that could help reshape our own thought and life in more earth-friendly ways” (80). While the schism caused by the Reformation receives more focus, the initial schism was that between what would now be called Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. In *A Short History of Christianity*, Martin Marty establishes the date of the first major schism as 1054 when legates of Pope Leo IX excommunicated Michael Cerularius, an Eastern patriarch. Although Marty cites multiple political and theological issues, iconoclasm of the Western Church was one of the most important differences. In the Eastern church, icons were a key aspect of religious worship.

Arnold's lovers in "Dover Beach" and Joyce's protagonist Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* both go to the beach, but what they see is very different. Although the world appears to lie before the couple's eyes as something with variety, beauty, and newness, the poet perceives that their eyes deceive them; underneath the reality is that there is no joy, love, light, certitude, peace or help for their pain. The world for them is really a place of confusion, struggle, and flight like ignorant armies clashing at night. For the couple, this is the reality of modernity; the beautiful is but a dream and disenchantment is the cruel reality. Stephen, as aspiring artist, sees the beach and the world differently. There he experiences an epiphany where the beauty of the outward world moves him to an encounter with the transcendent. In *Stephen Hero*, Joyce's unfinished novel that contains many of the same characters and incidents that were to appear in *Portrait*, the concept of epiphany is made clearer.

Stephen explains his concept of epiphany to his friend Cranly as "a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed that it was the duty of the man of letters to record those epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments" (288). This is the skill of the artist, to capture these ineffable and fleeting moments and to assist in transmuting the mundane aspects of daily existence into consciousness of transcendent realities through his imagination. There is no object so common that the artist cannot see epiphany within it, Stephen asserts, including the clock of the Ballast Office. Stephen tries to explain the process to Cranly as follows: "Imagine my glimpse at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised" (288). This

view seems to comport with William Blake's admonition of the importance of seeing through the eye to what lies beneath the surface of things.

Stephen unpacks his theory of epiphany in more detail by linking it to Aquinas's concept of the three things necessary for beauty: integrity or wholeness, symmetry and radiance (288). Stephen summarizes his views concerning the moment of epiphany as follows:

First we recognize that the object is *one* integral thing, then we recognize that it is an organized composite structure, a *thing* in fact: finally, when the relation of the parts is exquisite, when the parts are adjusted to the special point, we recognize that it is *that* thing which it is. Its soul, its whatness, leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance. The soul of the commonest object, the structure of which is so adjusted, seems to us radiant. The object achieves its epiphany. (289)

Underlying the appearance of any thing is its soul, which can be described as its whatness or essence—that which makes it uniquely what it is the world. When one sees through to the soul of a thing, its transcendent beauty appears as something glorious. This is a far cry from seeing matter as meaningless as moderns are prone to do. Commenting on Stephen's explanations regarding epiphany, Irene Hendry Chayes notes in her essay "Joyce's Epiphanies" that "It is a revelation quite as valid as the religious; in fact, from our present secular viewpoint, it perhaps would be more accurate to say that the revelation of the religious mystic is actually an esthetic revelation into which the mystic projects himself—as a participant, not merely as an observer and recorder" (360). She notes that the religious mystic assigns this source of revelation to God. The concept of

not merely seeing the transcendent revelation, but participating in it, is crucial to the sacramental imagination.

When Cranly interrogates Stephen about his renunciation of the Catholic faith, Stephen replies, “I am a product of Catholicism; I was sold to Rome before my birth. Now I have broken my slavery but I cannot in a moment destroy every feeling in my nature. That takes time” (278). Even as he turns away from the Church, Stephen acknowledges its deep impact on him as one born into Catholicism. Although Cranly counsels him to outwardly conform and inwardly rebel, Stephen indicates that anyone who is sensitive like him could not do that for long. Following his religion of unbelief will likely lead to a social crucifixion in Ireland, Cranly warns. Stephen indicates he cannot follow the Church or Jesus because “I must have my liberty to do as I please” (280). Stephen is excited by his escape from the Church and feels a sense of exhilaration. Even as he rejects Christianity, its metaphors saturate his imagination as he says, “I feel a wind rush through me” (281). When Jesus explains what it means to be born again to the Jewish religious leader, Nicodemus, in John chapter 3, he uses imagery of the wind to explain what the Holy Spirit’s work in salvation is like. Also, noteworthy is that Jesus describes the Spirit as blowing where it will, which seems to capture well what Stephen sees himself doing.

Stephen refuses to postpone living life now either for social and financial reward as Cranly suggests or for future hopes of heaven as it is implied the Church would plead. Instead he proclaims, “Life is now—this is life: If I postpone it I may never live. To walk nobly on the surface of the earth, to express oneself without pretence, to acknowledge one’s own humanity! You mustn’t think I rhapsodise: I am quite serious. I speak from my



soul” (281). When Cranly questions his reference to his soul, Stephen replies “Yes: from my soul, my spiritual nature. Life is not a yawn. Philosophy, love, art will not disappear from my world because I no longer believe that by entertaining an emotion of desire for the tenth part of a second I prepare for myself an eternity of torture. I am happy” (281). Stephen may reject Catholicism, but he affirms his spiritual nature. As in the discussion of epiphany above, he affirms that all things have souls, including himself. Now, in turning away from the Church, he will feed his soul on philosophy, love, and art. As was indicated in the discussion of *Ulysses* in Chapter 5, he confirms through Leopold Bloom that secular sacraments are means to epiphany.

Where the spiritual is exalted above the material, Joyce uses grotesque realism to bring the spiritual back to Earth because he sees epiphany coming through the mundane as illustrated in Stephen’s and Bloom’s lives. H. G. Wells commented that “Like [Jonathan] Swift . . . Mr. Joyce has a cloacal obsession. He would bring back into the general picture of life aspects which modern drainage and modern decorum have taken out of ordinary intercourse and conversation” (330). That which is most earthy can reveal transcendence is Joyce’s shocking assertion. Similarly, he uses Menippean satire to question the assumptions of society, including its dualisms, and to test their validity.

Many contemporary critics commented on Joyce’s literary realism. In playing a leading role in inventing the modern novel, Joyce is like a gifted jazz player who improvises based on a keen understanding of the limits and possibilities of his art form. He is so well versed in the history of literary style and technique that his virtuosity shines forth in the combination of synthesis and innovation. He delights in words and their ability to reveal and incarnate meaning and essence through their sound as well as their

signification. He stretches words, syntax, grammar, and language to their limits to reveal mysteries in matter. Because of the power of sacramental imagery to touch the transcendent, it is no surprise that his artistic imagination remains captivated by it even when he left the Church.

Flannery O'Connor was also born into the Catholic Church, which she never desired to leave. From the very beginning, her fertile imagination was fed on the richness of the Church's sacramental and biblical imagery. She sees her calling as a writer as prophetic in nature. Catholicism gave her life a coherent and connected framework for encountering and interpreting the world with a view to its past, present, and future. As an intellectual and a poet, she not only understood, but deeply felt the significance of modernity's flight from God. She experiences nihilism as the air her culture breathes, but she allows the fresh sea breezes of pre-modern perspective to blow away the clouds of despair. Perhaps most importantly, she sees her life as centered on the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. With such a mindset, the prevailing dualisms between body and soul, matter and spirit, nature and grace, secular and sacred, etc. were incongruous with reality and deeply damaging.

Whether fellow Catholics who were searching for moral uplift, Protestants whose anti-sacramentalism doomed them to heresy, or secular people who did not believe in God, O'Connor knew that it would be a challenge to help her readers to connect matter with mystery. She uses shock to reveal the sacramental nature of all of life. Because God's grace is so abundant that it is easily taken for granted, she finds that the best way to reveal it is sometimes by its absence. Yet, it is never far away, crouching in the shadows and tailing reluctant converts like Hazel Motes and O. E. Parker. As Haze came

to understand, Jesus is hungry for souls and is willing to sweep away all support structures through violence and allowing people to experience the natural consequences of their philosophical premises.

Nothing that inflates itself above true Christianity is safe from O'Connor's pricking pen whether it be nihilism, secular humanism, intellectualism, agnosticism, hedonism, gnostic Christianity, self-satisfied religiosity, or a host of other isms. The falls of her protagonists are fortunate in the sense of opening up the possibility of grace. Because her audience does not generally have a sacramental imagination that allows them so see mystery in matter, she uses the grotesque as a corrective lens to adjust their vision so that they can see the spiritual in the concrete. The grotesque in O'Connor's writing both reveals the reality of the Fall of humankind and the ability of God's grace to operate in and through that which seems broken and distorted. Her view of the reality of the Fall and Redemption translates into tragi-comedic stories that provide enough emotional distance for her readers to judge the futility of life without God for themselves without utterly despairing.

Like Joyce, O'Connor is well known for her realism. Both seek to reveal the world in what they perceive as all its fullness. Both use the grotesque in their own unique way to change their readers' perspectives on reality. While they both use sacramental imagery to reveal transcendent mysteries, Joyce points people to transcendent realities like the soul of things and the nature of beauty whereas O'Connor is clearly seeking to connect people with God who in His love and grace is the ultimate reality beyond all other realities. Both see the epiphany as an important way to connect people from the mundane to the transcendent, but O'Connor sees God as the initiator of epiphanies as a

revelation of His divine grace while Joyce sees the artist instigating the search for transcendence. While O'Connor clearly admired Joyce's artistry, she enters into an authorial dialogue with him by placing Joycean-like characters into some of her stories and allowing them to experience their comeuppance in encounters with God and His grace. From her perspective, Joyce, like Hemmingway, still yearns for a Catholic completeness in life.

Wendell Berry arrives on the literary scene about a decade after O'Connor. He too is a prophet-poet who is like one crying in the wilderness for repentance and restoration of the sacramental imagination. Both are Southerners. Both returned home after beginning their literary careers in the northeast. O'Connor did so reluctantly because of a debilitating disease. Like his fictional character, Andy Catlett, Berry did so by choice. Both benefitted greatly from being rooted in a place where they knew well the manners and speech of their fictional characters. Berry grew up as a Protestant, but considers himself a marginal Christian. I argue that his marginality results not from his departure from biblical truth, but from his closer association with it. What makes Berry unusual is his sacramental imagination, his rejection of the dualisms between body and soul, matter and spirit, etc., and his belief that such dualisms wreak havoc on every facet of human life.

Berry is a farmer in a multi-generational family of farmers who have all lived in the same community. Both his fiction and non-fiction emphasize the importance of ties to the land and the people in a specific place and community. He exemplifies the notion that one must know a place to truly love it, protect it, and improve it. For him, community is best embodied in the term membership, which reflects a choice to continue to commit

oneself to both people and place for the good of all. This commitment extends beyond those currently living to those who have died and to those yet to be born. Berry's approach is countercultural in every way. While personal independence is widely considered a cultural virtue of the highest order in America, Berry calls for interdependence as the way to live the good life and avoid the perils of alienation.

The tragedy of Christianity in Berry's view is that Christians have generally not only acquiesced, but been complicit in the cultural and environmental destruction associated with the dualisms of modernity. He finds the body-soul dualism at the heart of such problems, which is antithetical to biblical teaching concerning the creation; incarnation, death, resurrection and bodily ascension of Christ; and Christ's promise of resurrected bodies dwelling in a new heavens and a new Earth. To reject good theology is to inevitably reject the good economy, the good culture, and a host of other goods.

Like O'Connor, Berry rejects the sacred/secular distinction. For him, all things in creation are sacred. One can desecrate that which is sacred, but that does not change its Godward teleology. Because of his view that all things in creation are sacred, Berry has been called pansacramental. In this view, everything in life is intended to and is capable of mediating an encounter with God and His grace. This allows for an endless number of sacraments. Although Berry uses imagery that clearly seems to allude to Christian sacraments, his allusions are generally somewhat less explicit in that regard than those of O'Connor. Berry's views of the sacramental nature of the world seem more in line with Eastern Orthodoxy than with the Protestantism that he is uneasy with due to its dualisms. Marriage, eating, growing food, and good work of any kind are rightly seen as sacramental from Berry's perspective. Against, body-soul dualism, Berry contends that

when God breathed into the dust of the earth Adam became a living soul; not a soul slipped into a body like a letter into an envelope.

Berry's most personal writing is his poetry of which he has written a great deal. Much of his poetry would fit into the category of nature poetry. Berry's panentheism perceives God as immanent and present everywhere in His creation while remaining existentially distinct from it. Because God created all things and considers them good, they have intrinsic value according to Berry. This value is enhanced by God's presence in and with all things. The value of creation is also seen in its ability to function sacramentally in bringing people into an understanding of and relationship with God. Furthermore, everything in creation is intended to be received as good gifts of love that are to be fully enjoyed. They are also to be given back to God in praise, worship, and work that does good to other creatures.

Even though his essays and fiction are compelling, Berry perhaps best shows how to rediscover a sacramental imagination through his nature poetry. In his poems, Berry shows the way to approach nature with humility, respect, attentiveness, and an openness to wonder. Through verse, he shows how nature teaches and blesses. Recovery of the sacramental imagination is the means to restore a right relationship with all of creation and the Creator. Stewardship and sustainability are rooted in knowing, loving, and caring for a particular place. The Cartesian metaphor of the machine must give way to a new metaphor of ecosystem, which implies the interdependence of all things, living and inanimate. Poetry plays a much lesser role in the work of Joyce and O'Connor.

Berry's fictional style differs significantly from that of Joyce and O'Connor. The shocking, the violent, and the grotesque play a lesser role in his fiction. However, Berry

shares with Joyce and O'Connor a propensity for epiphanies. Like O'Connor, epiphanies in Berry's literature can derive from seemingly ordinary events like a dip in a cool spring on a hot day or from memories, visions, or dreams. Whatever the exact methodology for their delivery, God is seen as actively communicating to people through epiphany in Berry as in O'Connor. In Berry, the epiphanies often reinforce the nature of communal membership with the dead as well as the living; something that could not be easily demonstrated apart from visions and dreams. Dreams can also be a profound source to reveal the dystopia of life apart from God and intimate community as Andy Catlett experiences prior to recovery of his sacramental imagination.

While O'Connor's and Joyce's fiction certainly revolve around relationships between people, Berry's fictional oeuvre is all set in the fictional community of Port William, Kentucky, a place that one can imagine is very much like the rural farming community where Berry was born and raised and has lived most of his life. As such, Berry's stories build on multi-generational relationships between and within families, which allows for a richer opportunity to see how characters develop over time, not only in relation to their personal growth but in their relationships with one another within and between families. One can see a character like Andy Catlett as a young boy as well as an adult. The series of novels and short stories allows for more depth of characterization in a variety of circumstances and allows for an incarnation of the importance that Berry ascribes to place and community. Berry's works of fiction certainly contain both comedy and tragedy. As with O'Connor, this ability to blend comedy and tragedy is likely based on Berry's belief in the reality of the Fall and Redemption and his attempt to somewhat

fully capture the essence of life lived in community. Christian hope is palpable in the midst of tragedy in Berry's fiction.

All three authors covered in this thesis enter into cultural criticism through their fictional works. Joyce seems to inveigh against nationalism, parochialism, bigotry, and various aspects of the Catholic Church. O'Connor critiques the Enlightenment project and its aftermath, especially nihilism, intellectual hubris, hedonism, and generally the wasteland of modernity apart from God. Forms of Christianity and Christians that are gnostic, self-righteous, smug, and proud are all subject to her satiric wit. Berry champions place, community, and the treatment of life as gift, and shows the devastating consequences when these basic principles of living the good life are forgotten or disdained on behalf of consumerism, individualism, and uses of technology that fail to take humanity and the Earth into account. All three authors are clearly against dualisms that make divisions between things that are meant to be complementary. Dualisms between body and soul and between sacred and secular are especially a concern from their perspective.

The use of sacramental imagery in Joyce, O'Connor, and Berry can take different forms. In O'Connor's use of sacramental imagery, there is often a clear reference to one or more of the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church. Given O'Connor's acknowledgement of the centrality of the sacraments in her own life and the way the seven sacraments are intended to cover all stages of a person's life, this seems understandable and natural. Coming from his Protestant, but pansacramental, viewpoint, Berry uses imagery that is both reflective of sacraments of the Christian Church and that reach beyond to other vital aspects of life. He clearly seems to see marriage in a



sacramental way in a manner akin to Catholics and some Protestant sects, but other aspects of life, including growing food, eating, and doing good work are also treated in a sacramental way.

With Joyce, the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church are frequently alluded to, but he expands the notion to secular equivalents of sacraments, which befits his notion that anything can be a source of epiphany that leads to the transcendent for the artist's imagination. Although all three authors use sacramental imagery in their fiction, their individual fictional works should be also be viewed as sacramental texts. They should first of all be entered into and fully enjoyed as complete works of art before they are dissected, to use Wordsworth's idiom.

Where might the research in this thesis lead next? Originally, I had planned to include another Catholic writer, Toni Morrison (1931-), as part of the analysis in this thesis. She was left out primarily to make the scope of my project more reasonable for a Master's level thesis. Sacramental imagery is clearly evident in her novel, *Paradise*, and embracing embodiment is a key theme in her novel, *Beloved*. Morrison's perspective as a female, African-American author would add to the richness of perspective on both the themes of sacramental imagination and what I see as its antithesis in various dualisms plaguing modernity and post-modernity. In addition, I think the importance of secular rituals in the writings of authors like Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings (1896-1953) would be very revealing and instructive for how humanity might better live together in a secular age. The importance of both sacred and secular rituals are underappreciated in our day. Looking at literature through the lens of ritual theory will pay great dividends, in my

view. Finally, further exploring the relationship between environmental stewardship and the sacramental imagination seems warranted and worthwhile.

One could potentially point to many maladies plaguing modernity and post-modernity. From my perspective, the dualisms that pit body against soul, the physical against the spiritual, nature against grace, reason against imagination, etc. are at the heart of many problems. These dualities separate human beings from one another, from the Earth, from the divine/transcendent, and ultimately from themselves. This is why they are so damaging. Science has gained ascendancy in our age by purporting to be the source of objective truth. Despite its many successes, science will never be able to answer the questions that human beings care most about—questions about meaning, purpose, and the things that join us together as human beings. Narrative, metaphors, and rituals are the means by which humans have always derived meaning, coherence, and understanding of themselves.

Recovering the sacramental imagination once again is one of the best ways I can see to assert the importance of this holistic way to approach the good life. Whether one is Catholic, Protestant, secular, or an adherent to another religion, I believe that learning to see the world sacramentally is something to seriously consider. In this thesis I have brought together three poet-prophets that continue to speak to our generation. From the darkling plain of modernity, they cry out. Their stories have always enriched our humanity. I believe a closer look at their sacramental approach will not only bring deeper appreciation of their work, but a way to live that resists alienation, nihilism, and environmental destruction. Authors like Joyce, O'Connor, and Berry help us to see not

just with, but through the eye. Rather than seeing into nothing, they help us connect with the mystery of being.

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